Europe’s Indo-Pacific embrace: Global partnerships for regional resilience

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FOREWORD

The Council of the European Union has recently approved conclusions on the strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, setting out the EU’s intention to reinforce its strategic focus, presence, and actions in this region of enormous importance for our interests.

The aim is to contribute to stability, security, prosperity, and sustainable development, at a time of rising challenges and tensions in the area. This renewed commitment to the Indo-Pacific, a region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island states, will have a long-term focus and will be based on upholding democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and respect for international law.

Current dynamics in the Indo-Pacific have given rise to intense geopolitical competition adding to increasing tensions on trade and supply chains as well as in technological, political, and security areas. Human rights are also being challenged. These developments increasingly threaten the stability and security of the region and beyond, directly impacting on the EU’s interests.

The EU should continue to develop partnerships in the areas of security and defence, including to address maritime security, malicious cyber activities, disinformation, emerging technologies, terrorism, and organised crime. The EU and its regional partners should also work together to mitigate the economics and human effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and work towards ensuring an inclusive and sustainable socio-economic recovery.

The EU intends to promote its role as a cooperative partner in the Indo-Pacific, bringing added-value to relations with all its partners in the region. The EU and its 27 member states are already working together comprehensively in the region, significantly contributing to development and humanitarian assistance, tackling climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, concluding ambitious free trade agreements, and contributing to the upholding of international law including human rights and freedom of navigation.

Our strategic approach and engagement with the region should be principled with a long-term perspective, contributing to our capability to act as a global actor. We should foster a rules-based international order, a level playing field as well as an open and fair environment for trade and investment, reciprocity, the strengthening of resilience, tackling climate change and supporting connectivity. Our aim is to secure free and open maritime supply routes in full compliance with international law, in particular UNCLOS, in the interest of all. The EU’s engagement should contribute to enhancing its strategic sovereignty and ability to cooperate with partners to safeguard our values and interests.

This renewed commitment to the region is inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU, building upon already adopted EU strategic documents concerning the region. Our Indo-Pacific strategy is pragmatic, flexible, and multi-faceted, allowing us to adapt and build cooperation according to specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values, or mutual interest.

This compendium is emblematic of the type of cooperation we are seeking. It results from a partnership between a European institution, in the form of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and an Indo-Pacific institution, in the Perth USAsia Centre. It brings together contributions on eight countries spanning the two regions, as well as the EU and Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The publication will be an invaluable tool for informing future partnership building between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.
INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific’s centrality to 21st century geopolitics has long been recognised by those in the region. It already hosts 60 per cent of the world’s population and is expected to account for more than half of the global economy by the end of this decade. Regional military budgets are expanding at a faster rate than elsewhere. But these facts are also being recognised by those outside the region, whose desires for global prosperity and security now demand closer engagement with Indo-Pacific dynamics. Foremost amongst these are European governments.

In recent years, four European states and the European Union have released policy documents telegraphing an intent for greater engagement with the Indo-Pacific. European approaches share a strong desire to preserve multilateral and rules-based approaches to regional and global order. They also place a premium on partnership-building with resident Indo-Pacific powers in pursuit of these goals. But naturally there are key differences between the regional outlooks of European and Indo-Pacific governments, in terms of the mix of interests, values, and objectives each prioritises. There are also specific characteristics and capabilities that differentiate European approaches from one another.

Understanding how European and Indo-Pacific actors will interact within the region is vital to all concerned. There is a need for increased knowledge of where European and Indo-Pacific interests are best-placed to cooperate with one another, on which issues, and through which channels. This report set ten eminent authors the task of ‘locating’ Europe within the 21st century Indo-Pacific. Five focus on the Indo-Pacific approaches of the European powers: the EU, France, Germany, Netherlands, and the UK. Another five focus on how rising European interest intersects with the perspectives of Japan, Australia, India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the United States.

This volume advances the debate on how European governments can most effectively engage with Indo-Pacific partners. Promisingly, several complementary interests and abilities of European and Indo-Pacific powers are identified in the various essays. These provide logical avenues of future progress for the respective parties. There are equally as many fresh ideas and opportunities identified, which provide for increased investigation by policy communities in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Key questions

1. What are the key factors driving rising European engagement in the Indo-Pacific?
2. What interests, values, and objectives do European governments wish to achieve?
3. How have Indo-Pacific governments responded to increased European interest in the region?
4. What are the potential avenues of European and Indo-Pacific cooperation?
5. What key factors will determine the success or failure of European Indo-Pacific strategies and partnerships?

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CHAPTER 1.
WHERE IS THE EU HEADED IN THE INDO-PACIFIC?
FRÉDÉRIC GRARE

On 16 April, 2021, the Council of the European Union, the main decision-making body of the EU, published its conclusions on the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The Council invited the European Commission and High Representative to present a Joint Communication by September 2021. Interestingly, although the related press release spoke of “the renewed commitment to the Indo-Pacific”, the Commission was adamantly opposed to the idea of an Indo-Pacific strategy only a few months earlier. Ever since it made its own national Indo-Pacific strategy public in 2018, France had been pushing for a European document without any success. Things changed in September 2020 when the German government published its policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region, which was followed by a Dutch Indo-Pacific strategy paper. The joint commitment of the three countries was the key to a successful process at the EU level, whose speed was truly remarkable by European standards.

However, while the Council’s Conclusions indicated a new and welcome level of political will, they did not instantly transform the EU into a unified Indo-Pacific actor. The Conclusions’ directives reflected the ambivalence and contradictions of member states on several issues. Their non-binding character also enabled agreements on principles without any need for real commitments.

This chapter examines the process which led the EU to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as the document’s content and significance for regional partners. It argues that the strategy reflects a deep evolution in the way Europe looks at its interests in the Indo-Pacific and its potential role in the region. It highlights the various issues which must be addressed for the strategy to be more than a formal exercise. The EU strategy can become a very useful instrument not only for asserting the EU’s Indo-Pacific presence and influence but also creating more balanced strategic relationships in the region. A high-quality dialogue with partners will be critical to the success of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Europe’s path to the Indo-Pacific
As with its member states, the EU could not ignore the changing geostrategic and geoeconomic realities of the Indo-Pacific region and the need for an urgent response. However, the relative importance of key factors varied depending on the national interests of member states. The wide range of EU positions on the rise of China was the most obvious example.

Although European anxieties about the consequences of China’s rise were not new, member states did not always share them to the same degree. Economic dependence on China, or hopes that China might become a more significant investor in less developed European economies, either prevented or complicated public expression of such concerns. This equation began changing as disillusion about the failure of Chinese commitments to materialise began to grow. There were also growing concerns about the unbalanced nature of the economic relationship, including a lack of reciprocity in European access to the Chinese market. Further momentum for an EU-wide response followed China instrumentalising the Covid pandemic to support its ideological ambitions. The pandemic also led to a sudden realisation of European overdependence on China for several critical goods, including medical and pharmaceutical supplies.

Joe Biden’s late 2020 election as United States president subsequently crystallised the impression of the US-China rivalry as the defining feature of international relations for years, or possibly decades, to come. Most, if not all, EU member states were keen to avoid the consequences of this great power rivalry. However, there was an obvious risk if the US abandoned its role in ensuring European security. Questions about the sustainability of US commitment to European security had already been aggravated during the Trump presidency. Though not explicitly expressed, related anxieties proved central in shifting the opinions of most EU countries on Indo-Pacific strategy, in particular countries from the former Soviet sphere of influence, apprehensive of being left alone in confronting Russia.

Other considerations also played a role in the formation of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy. All European governments have perceived the Indo-Pacific as a field of economic opportunity but only a few see it as being exclusively that. Yet the conquest of market shares is by definition a zero-sum game. This means that even those oriented in this direction have de facto accepted the idea that the Indo-Pacific is also, if not primarily, about managing or even containing the rise of China.
These realities combined challenge the belief Europe could remain de facto neutral between the US and China or even that there never was any realistic position of equidistance if the Commission refrained from endorsing and engaging with the Indo-Pacific. On the contrary, the EU came to understand that adopting an Indo-Pacific strategy was a way to manage both the rise of China and the US alliance on its own terms. This was even as individual member states, such as Hungary, retained some ambivalence regarding their stances vis-à-vis China and positioned themselves differently on issues around which the strategy was articulated.

**What does the EU strategy stand for?**

Although the strategy remains under construction at the time of writing, the Council's Conclusions give a clear indication of what its main areas of focus should be. They reflect the values and interests, complexity, and ultimately the identity of the EU.

The EU’s intention is to “reinforce its strategic focus, presence and actions in this region”, described as spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island states. These actions are considered “of prime importance for the EU’s interests”, while contributing “to regional stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development”. The EU sees geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific as a direct threat to its own interests. This includes through the tensions it generates with respect to supply chains and its effects on technological, political and security areas. In an oblique reference to China, the Conclusions also argue that challenges to the universality of human rights constitute an attack on European values. Consequently, the Conclusions underline the need for a principled strategic approach and engagement with the region; fostering a rules-based international order in all sectors; a level playing field as well as reciprocity in economic matters; and the “strengthening of resilience, tackling climate change and supporting connectivity”.

However, the Council’s document is not just a simple statement of principles. It indicates several priorities the EU intends to pursue cooperatively in the Indo-Pacific over the coming years. This encompasses objectives as diverse as preventing climate change, promoting the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological resources, working on natural risk reduction, advancing the EU’s economic agenda, protecting its supply chains, and contributing to Indo-Pacific security.

Overall, the directions set by the Council's Conclusions aim to protect and promote European interests. But they also reflect a tension between two visions, not only of the Indo-Pacific but international relations in general. The first of these establishes development as a goal in itself, while stability and security are its logical consequences. The second sees development goals as primarily meant to support strategic objectives. Although the lines are often blurred between these two approaches, this dichotomy separates the External Action Service and the Commission, as well as individual member states, from one another.

This dichotomy nonetheless takes on a new meaning when examined in the light of the ambivalence vis-à-vis China. As many EU policies depend on voluntary participation, member states are comfortable accepting objectives which they support in principle but do not feel bound to contribute towards. This can either be because they do not have the capacities or simply wish to avoid adopting any attitudes China may perceive as confrontational.

A recent report from the European Council on Foreign Relation illustrates this commitments gap well. It analyses the preferences of members states on issues the EU Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to address and highlights resources or political capital they are willing to commit to them. The gap is particularly striking when it comes to security issues. The Conclusions’ broad security agenda encompasses commitments “including maritime security, malicious cyber-activities, disinformation, [responding to challenges] from emerging and disruptive technologies, countering and improving resilience to terrorism, violent extremism and hybrid threats, countering organized crime and illicit trafficking”. The vast majority of EU member states consider such security commitments an important component of the EU strategy. Yet few are willing to concretely support them. Only four out of 27 countries (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain) declare a willingness to send warships to the Indo-Pacific, for example, while France already has a naval presence.

In this context, a commitment to enhanced connectivity has emerged as the central, multidimensional agenda. Digital, transport, energy, and human dimensions of connectivity are expected to be addressed in partnership within the Indo-Pacific region. This focus is likely to become even more prominent in the years to come. The 2018 EU connectivity strategy, which is also yet to be implemented, is partly being reframed in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy and endowed with significant resources. Its priorities are, however, still to be defined.
Europe’s Indo-Pacific friends and foes

The above considerations raise questions regarding the value of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy as an instrument for outreach. Cooperation is at the core of the strategy. The EU intends primarily to “deepen its engagement on the Indo-Pacific in particular with those partners that have already announced Indo-Pacific approaches of their own”. ASEAN, Australia, India, Japan will therefore be partners of choice. The EU also intends to develop a more comprehensive approach to the Indian and Pacific oceans, by working with small island states as well as regional organisations.

The Council’s Conclusions mention neither China nor the US by name. The former is only obliquely referred to through the enumeration of challenges threatening EU interests. The latter is only very indirectly alluded to through the mention of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. It would be a mistake to conclude the EU is seeking equidistance between China and the US. Though China is largely seen as part of Europe’s Indo-Pacific problems, the Conclusions do not explicitly consider the US a solution, partly to avoid being seen as taking side in the US/China rivalry and partly because of its own divisions over the China question. Since all decisions are based on consensus, the expressed preference is to consider the EU as having relatively inclusive and pragmatic, or “flexible and multifaceted” options in the region.

The EU’s relatively decisive Indo-Pacific rhetoric is not generally matched by member states. Europeans largely take comfort in the support for inclusivity that is hard-wired into endorsement of the Indo-Pacific concept by other parties. But “inclusivity” is itself an ambiguous term when applied to potential European Indo-Pacific cooperation that potentially includes China. Depending on the interlocutors, the term refers to two rather distinct and competing concepts. One assumes differences in values and conflicts of interests with China, while perceiving cooperation as a lever to encourage China to adhere to internationally accepted standards. The other simply ignores and evades discussion of all potentially problematic aspects of the China relationship. The ambiguity contrasts with the practice of Europe’s potential partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, Japan, and India, who remain steadfastly committed to the first option on inclusivity and cannot afford the second for obvious geographical reasons. But it is relatively close to the position of ASEAN, like Europe a multinational body whose members are highly divided over the China question.

The absence of any direct mention of the US in the Conclusions is, on the other hand, not indicative of any real European distance from Washington. Most EU member states are part of NATO and highly dependent on the US for their security. Many of them make clear that their support for the security dimension of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy is intimately linked to their willingness to secure US commitment to European security. Paying mere lip service to the US concerns is, however, unlikely to buy the EU serious credibility or goodwill.

The road to success

From refusing to officially use the term “Indo-Pacific” to drafting its own strategy, Europe has already come a long way. But deep divisions persist regarding what goals Indo-Pacific engagement should pursue and what forms it should take. This is true both within the Commission and among member states. The main dividing lines are not only about the stance which should be adopted vis-à-vis China, but also about the choice of a more developmental approach as opposed to a more strategic one.

Moreover, because Indo-Pacific issues are as diverse as the region is vast, there is a real risk that divisions may continue to multiply, impacting the coherence, as well as the very raison d’être of the EU strategy. Ultimately, the EU approach to the Indo-Pacific may end up being no more than a collection of principles, without any real substance. It may convey no real political message to friends and foes alike.

It would, however, be a mistake for potential partner countries to accept this rather pessimistic fate and wait for EU policy to evolve of its own accord. The future of the strategy and its potential success or failure depend in part on the quality of the dialogue the EU establishes with others in the region. This dialogue will be necessary at many different levels and will help the EU understand the evolving nature of Indo-Pacific issues. It will also help the EU realise there is no alternative but to address them.

The dialogue will likely have some other concrete impacts. Connectivity is a case in point. The EU is now able to dedicate substantial financial means to this end but still lacks clear criteria to decide upon concrete projects. This in turn has a negative impact on its capacity to promote European quality standards. Dialogue with partners should, therefore, be tailored toward project identification and prioritisation. The recent EU-India connectivity partnership, which includes a clause for cooperation in third countries exemplifies this approach. Creating coordination mechanisms with other
partners such as Australia and Japan could also be useful in this context to allow for complementarity and avoid duplication in a context of limited resources.

Maritime security is another domain in which dialogue and cooperation will matter and could change the EU's approach to the region over time. The EU is currently highly dependent on the Indo-Pacific for its trade but unable to secure its own sea lines of communication. Most EU member states do not have the capacity to substantially increase their naval presence in the area. But a better understanding of the changing nature of the maritime security landscape could allow for some niche but meaningful contributions from the EU and a larger number of member states.

Finally, trade is by essence a cooperative endeavour. Cooperation is increasingly also the key to technological success. In all these domains, the EU is a potentially valuable partner.

Ultimately, Europe’s Indo-Pacific partners will have to learn to deal with the complexities of the EU. For obvious historical reasons, the EU was conceived in a way that prevents the primacy of power politics. It is thus ill-equipped to address some current challenges of the Indo-Pacific, which is the defining strategic domain of our time. The drafting of an Indo-Pacific strategy is a hesitant, small, yet meaningful step to overcoming this legacy.
In May 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech at the Garden Island Naval Base in Sydney, Australia, where he outlined a French strategy for the Indo-Pacific. With this speech, France formally positioned itself as an 'Indo-Pacific power' and became the first European country to adopt the concept as a regional framework. France’s approach to the region reflects unique sensitivities. It has also been the driving force for broader European engagement with the Indo-Pacific.

France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is heavily influenced by its overseas territories of Mayotte and La Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island in the Pacific. The region is home to 1.5 million French citizens, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans comprise more than 90 per cent of France’s large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which spans 11 million km². The French Government has formed trade and security partnerships with important Indo-Pacific countries and maintains vital maritime routes in the region. As the primary theatre of Sino-American strategic rivalry, the stability of the Indo-Pacific is under growing threat. Furthermore, the depletion of natural resources, impacts of climate change, territorial disputes, and violations of the Law of the Sea all threaten the regional status quo. There is now a wide recognition that the deterioration of the security environment in the Indo-Pacific puts French interests at risk.

From his earliest days in office, Macron made it clear that he wanted France to play a central role in global governance and multilateralism by upholding values and principles. He has also repeatedly underlined the risks of Chinese hegemony and the need for France to develop its own approach to the Indo-Pacific, to act as a credible and responsible stakeholder in the region. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy therefore aims to maintain stability and shape the region in a positive way, while protecting and deterring against threats. This approach, focusing on maritime security and multilateralism, is to be implemented in coordination with regional partners.

France also took the lead on encouraging development of a European Union strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific. The EU’s assets and strategic weight allows France to increase its leverage while continuing to maintain its strategic autonomy as a core element of national identity.

France as a responsible Indo-Pacific stakeholder

As an Indo-Pacific resident power, France first seeks to defend its sovereign interests in the region, “from Djibouti to Polynesia”. Central to its regional engagement is monitoring and managing its vast EEZ in the face of increasing threats. In addition, French sovereignty over some of its overseas territories is under strain. New Caledonia is torn between pro-independence and conservative groups, and a referendum in December 2021 will decide the fate of the island. Already, reports about a growing Chinese influence in New Caledonia (which has important stocks of nickel) are worrying.

France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is clearly motivated by China’s rise. The French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, published in 2019, describes the expansion of China as a destabilising factor, shifting the balance of power, challenging democratic values, and triggering strong security concerns. In particular, the advance of China in the South China Sea and the opening of a large Chinese base in Djibouti in 2017 served as a wake-up call. France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, while not targeting any country, also aims to check Beijing’s inappropriate behaviour, as well as achieving a level-playing field with China by networking with regional partners.

As a permanent member of the United National Security Council, France has the legitimacy and duty to act as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific and across the world. France thus upholds a principles-based approach to global affairs, standing for freedom of maritime and aerial transit, multilateralism, principles of transparency and respect of human rights, and a rules-based order. Freedom of navigation stands out as one of the key challenges and concerns for France: any disruption of vital maritime routes would be disastrous for the European economy. Accordingly, France supports the strict application of the Law of the Sea.

While not taking sides on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, France has consistently sent surveillance frigates through the South and East China Seas since 2014. In June 2019, the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle was sent to Singapore during the Shangri-La Dialogue. At the time, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly promised that French vessels would continue upholding international law in a “steady, non-confrontational but obstinate way”. In February 2021, Parly revealed that a French nuclear-powered submarine had just patrolled the South China Sea, demonstrating the capacity to deploy at
long range and in coordination with strategic partners. The steady dispatch and patrol of French ships in the Indo-Pacific is necessary for gathering first-hand information, an indispensable foundation for an independent assessment of the geostrategic reality.

In the same vein, France aims to develop maritime surveillance capabilities in the region. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is a requirement for better managing one’s own EEZ and ensuring the openness of maritime routes. Achieving better MDA through capacity-building, networking of partners, and information sharing also helps maintain a favourable balance of power, by ensuring that littoral and island states are in a better position to monitor their territories. France also wants to contribute to the resilience of regional countries vulnerable to climate change or natural disasters. Cooperation in environmental security is indeed a distinct feature of the French Indo-Pacific strategy.

Balancing strategic autonomy and regional partnerships

While great power rivalry provides an important background to the French Indo-Pacific strategy, Paris’ approach is not to act as a new competitor, but rather to mitigate Sino-US tensions by fostering a multipolar and multilateral region governed by the rule of law. It emphasizes the independent and inclusive nature of its Indo-Pacific strategy for this reason. President Macron has asserted that France should be a “balancing power” (puissance d’équilibre) by offering an alternative to bilateral confrontation, while also maintaining a robust dialogue and partnership with China. At the same time, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy has elements of a balancing approach vis-à-vis Beijing. Macron also mentioned the need for France to coordinate with like-minded partners in front of China, to avoid a hegemony that could be detrimental to French interests.

As its capacity to militarily mobilise in the region is limited, France relies on its defence and security ties with Indo-Pacific partners. France’s key partnerships with India, Australia, and Japan are founded upon common values and similar interests and reinforced by defence deals and concrete security cooperation. These defence pacts aim to share key information and reinforce interoperability and coordination at sea, including cross-deck operations, replenishment-at-sea, minesweeping, and anti-submarine warfare. These partnerships support French vessels to patrol and deploy in the vast Indo-Pacific and advance France’s efforts to monitor its territories.

France’s defence agreements with Indo-Pacific partners have been demonstratively put into practice in the region. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020 an Indian Navy P-8 aircraft visited La Réunion to conduct a coordinated maritime patrol with French forces. France and India are also co-developing a constellation of satellites to monitor the Indian Ocean. France’s strategic partnership with Australia focuses on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and other maritime security issues, including monitoring of climate change and sustainable development issues. In April 2021, a joint Australia-France patrol sailed the South China Sea for the first time, upholding freedom of navigation operations. France has also gradually institutionalised bilateral security cooperation with Japan. A comprehensive maritime dialogue has been established, and an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement signed in 2019 facilitates more ambitious joint exercises. The amphibious exercises ARC21 that took place on the Southwestern islands of Japan between French, US, Japanese, and Australian defence forces in May 2021 demonstrated significant progress in political and technical interoperability among the four partners. Trilateral discussions are now developing out of these parallel partnerships. France is still reluctant to seek to formally join the Quad of the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Yet it held its La Pérouse joint naval exercises with the four Quad partners for the first time in April 2021, which demonstrated its capability as a convening power with credible naval capacities.

France has additionally prioritised the deepening of relations with Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries. It is aiming to “build up the strategic autonomy” of its Southeast Asian partners as an alternative to their respective partnerships with China and the US. This includes through the provision of defence equipment and training, and developmental assistance on environmental issues and health.

More generally, reviving multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is seen as key for ensuring regional stability, mitigating great power competition, and organising conditions of access and use of common spaces. France is already part of several major multilateral fora in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. New Delhi supported Paris’ access to the Indian Ocean Rim Association in December 2020. France is also now chairing the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, with the objective of revitalising it.
Building a European approach to the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific narrative has also gained momentum in wider Europe. Distrust of China has been growing and the Covid-19 crisis illustrated how events in Asia could directly impact European security. Germany, which was once very cautious to not antagonise China, published its own Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2020, followed by the Netherlands. Council conclusions on an EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific were adopted in April 2021, marking a turning point for the European position in the region.

France has played the key role in driving a European engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The whole-of-EU approach to the region complements France’s Indo-Pacific strategy and increases its strategic weight vis-à-vis China and the US. Furthermore, the EU has significant capacity to support sustainable development, infrastructure, and capacity building through its EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy. Coordinating with European partners is also a way to enhance the visibility and significance of French deployments and activities. In 2016, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves le Drian called for a greater European presence in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea. Subsequently, in 2017, British troops as well as twelve officers from European countries joined the French naval mission Jeanne d’Arc. The EU Coordinated Maritime Presence now provides a new flexibility for interested EU member states to establish a multinational naval presence for political signalling, naval diplomacy, and information gathering, as indicated by the EU Indo-Pacific strategy. The EU has also had extensive experience in combating piracy in the Horn of Africa and building Maritime Domain Awareness capabilities in the Western Indian Ocean over the past twelve years. It is expanding its cooperation to the Eastern Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia through the CRIMARIO II (2020-2023) and Enhancing Security In and With Asia projects.

France’s Indo-Pacific strategy provides means of dealing with China’s expanding influence, the Sino-American strategic rivalry, and the general transformation of global order that would otherwise risk France being marginalised. By adopting the Indo-Pacific narrative, France has positioned itself not only as a key European power, but a resident power and responsible stakeholder in a key geopolitical arena. By promoting a principles-based approach, France has reemphasised the universality of its national identity, while simultaneously pursuing its concrete interests in terms of maintaining a balance of power, maritime security, governance of the commons, and multilateralism. A key feature of its strategic posture is maintaining strategic autonomy, which can be achieved through promotion of multilateralism, cooperation with partners, and coordination with the broader European approach.

However, several challenges must be overcome to ensure the success of France’s strategy. First, despite the political rhetoric that established the Indo-Pacific as a national priority, only limited capacities are available to mobilise in this region. The tyranny of distance makes any deployment of military assets a significant obstacle. To rapidly intervene in the area, France should consider establishing a new location for prepositioned forces. Second, France should ensure its overseas territories fully endorse its Indo-Pacific strategy and are prepared to play the necessary strategic role in enhancing French influence in the region. Third, France should better explain its strategic autonomy posture to its regional partners, some of whom might view it as a sign of a wavering commitment to the Indo-Pacific. Finally, Paris should ensure the EU’s Indo-Pacific vision is implemented swiftly and concretely. This will be a priority of the French Presidency of the European Union in 2022.
Twenty years after its last naval presence in the region ended, Germany has sent its frigate Bayern on a six-month mission through Indo-Pacific waters from August 2021. The visit has a twofold purpose. From a security perspective, Bayern aims to demonstrate that Germany actively stands up for the freedom of navigation in international waters and compliance with international law. From a diplomatic perspective, port stops in combination with joint naval exercises with Australia, Japan, and the US underline Germany’s stance alongside its democratic value partners in the region. During the deployment, Bayern will take part in multilateral activities such as monitoring the United Nations sanctions against North Korea and supporting the NATO and EU missions Operation Sea Guardian and Atlanta.

The deployment points to a Germany which is slowly recalibrating its traditional, non-confrontational post-World War II approach to foreign and security policy. With the publication of its Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in September 2020, Germany acknowledged the Indo-Pacific as the region where “more than anywhere else, [...] the shape of the international rules-based order of tomorrow will be decided.” The Guidelines commit Germany to co-shaping this international order based “on rules and international cooperation, not on the law of the strong.” Deepening and diversifying relations with partners in a broad range of domains will be the foundation of Germany’s inclusive approach towards the Indo-Pacific.

Germany’s pivot to the Indo-Pacific

In contrast to the other European countries with overseas territories, such as France and the United Kingdom, Germany does not have a natural seat at the Indo-Pacific table. The Guidelines identify the Indo-Pacific as a key strategic region whose future is decisive for the international world order, and for Germany’s own prosperity. The Indo-Pacific accounts for more than USD 450 billion worth of Germany’s trade, and is home to the maritime chokepoints of the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, through which almost half of global annual seaborne trade tonnage passes. As an export-oriented economy, Germany has an enormous stake in functioning global supply chains and open trade routes.

Germany’s policy towards the Indo-Pacific region has long focused on this economic interdependence and the key driver of trade. Its broader post-war foreign policy has been traditionally embedded in regionalism, pacifism, and a commitment to multilateralism. However, allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and beyond have been calling for Germany to adopt more global responsibility and a proactive role. Unstable transatlantic relations under former US President Donald Trump, changing power dynamics, and increasing systemic rivalry, not just in Asia, have led to a more realistic foreign policy discourse. As Chancellor Angela Merkel stated in 2017, “The era in which we could fully rely on others is over.” In her foundational address on security policy in November 2019, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer emphasised, “There is general consensus that Germany must become more active to face its strategic challenges, that we must do more in order to protect our values and interests.”

The Guidelines are a manifestation of the broad shifts in German foreign policy. They outline the new expectation of taking on more global responsibility and following a more strategic and comprehensive approach in the region. The paper published by the Federal Foreign Office is a fully fledged cross-departmental product of the entire German cabinet. Its formulation saw strong involvement from the Ministry of Defence but, in contrast with other European Indo-Pacific policies, was not led by it. The Guidelines’ wide range of focus areas reach from multilateralism to climate change, peace and security, human rights, trade, digitalisation, and public diplomacy.

The comprehensiveness of the Guidelines can, at the same time, invite criticism that Germany has produced a mere summary of existing bi- and multilateral actions and institutions in the Indo-Pacific, rather than a strategic, future-oriented guiding document. However, the document organises its multitude of priorities under a unifying theme: Germany, as part of the wider European Union, supports an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Together with partners in the region, as well as the EU and its member states, it aims to strengthen human rights and preserve rules-based trade and adherence to international law, in particular the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.
Diversification and inclusivity as the basis for Indo-Pacific engagement

The German Government considers the Indo-Pacific to be the “entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific,” though the Guidelines focus on South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania. The strong maritime emphasis compared with the previously used term Asia-Pacific is reflected in Germany’s consistent focus on maritime security and open sea lanes of communication. Particular weight is also given to intensifying relations with like-minded partners including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. In accordance with the strategic approaches of these value partners and further European and Indo-Pacific nations, Germany emphasises the unity and centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This shows there has been a clear recalibration of Germany’s previously Sino-centric Asia policy, which can be largely attributed to acknowledgment of the failure of the long-propagated approach of ‘change through trade’ to China.

China has viewed the publishing of the Guidelines as representing Germany joining the “US-led containment strategy against China.” The confrontational nature of the Indo-Pacific approach was seemingly confirmed by the Guidelines being released during the visit of Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi to Berlin. Xi Jinping’s increasingly assertive claims, the snowballing Sino-US rivalry, and changing transatlantic relations and priorities were certainly a catalyst for Germany to reconsider its policies. Yet Germany does not wish to depict itself as a confrontational player in the region. Rather, the Guidelines target an inclusive approach where rules and standards, not power, are the prevailing force. Germany’s approach to 5G focusing on a case-by-case assessment of trustworthiness for telecom vendors rather than a formal ban on Huawei and ZTE, is an example of this. It moreover acknowledges German angst around the threat of a ‘new cold war’ that will impact global security, stability, and supply chains.

Between signals and actions

Despite not having taken the official lead in their formation, the Federal Ministry of Defence has been overseeing the formal implementation of the Guidelines to a considerable extent. This includes hosting frequent virtual and in-person exchanges with Australia, India, Korea, Japan, Singapore, and the US. Germany has pursued advanced defence cooperation with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners, in addition to the Bayern deployment.

Defence and military cooperation, particularly in maritime and cyber security, are key priority areas of the Indo-Pacific Guidelines and the respective implementation strategy. Yet Germany certainly has no ambitions of being the next Indo-Pacific military power. While critics of the Bayern visit cite it as an example of “gunboat diplomacy,” it is best understood as sending a necessary signal of support to democratic partners in the region, including the US. Brake and Bruns describe the deployment as “a play with undertones, nuances, and subtle harmonies”, which could serve as an apt description of Germany’s fundamental approach towards the Indo-Pacific: balancing concerns for human rights, an international rules-based order, multilateralism, and, where possible, cooperation with Beijing.

The maintenance of peace and stability is the fundamental priority underpinning Germany’s wide-ranging ambitions in and with the Indo-Pacific. This will require the country’s leaders to better understand and acknowledge the interests of regional countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, so that it can provide valuable options for trade and economic cooperation, infrastructure, sustainability, and digital connectivity. Reciprocal cooperation and close coordination among democracies in Europe, Asia, and the Indo-Pacific is also essential and needs to be intensified to provide alternatives to China, whose far-reaching Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy is but the latest example of regional influence-seeking efforts.
Germany’s Indo-Pacific multi- and minilateralism

The Guidelines are subsequently embedded in a broader European approach to the region. As Minister of State Michael Roth put it, Germany’s “top priority is to get the EU back on track”. Germany is correspondingly a strong advocate for the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, however, Germany is fully aware of the significant challenges which face the application of concrete EU commitments to the region. These include diverging industrial and economic priorities – including between Germany and its fellow member states – and standpoints vis-à-vis China, as well as varying levels of commitment to concrete actions in the Indo-Pacific under a European flag. One way around this has been the pursuit of thematically focused minilaterals within and beyond the EU. An example is the E3 format including the UK, Germany, and France that Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer proposes to institutionalise. There is also potential for intensified cooperation with the Indo-Pacific involving Germany, the EU, and other European nations through existing multilateral frameworks. These include the ‘Quad’ dialogue containing Australia, India, Japan, and the US, G20, NATO, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

While not explicitly part of Germany’s Indo-Pacific Guidelines, relations with the US as its most important Indo-Pacific ally have influenced the recalibration of Germany’s foreign policy and its approach to the region. Since the inauguration of President Joe Biden, the US has continued to prioritise the Indo-Pacific as the most significant foreign policy theatre. This has been demonstrated with the virtual Quad Leaders’ Summit as his first official multilateral meeting, and various visits to the region by Biden’s diplomatic team. As repeatedly emphasised after the frequent meetings of Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer and her counterpart Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, Germany is seeking a close and sustainable dialogue with the US and deepening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. With its Guidelines, Germany moreover showed its willingness to do more for its own security and defence – as long called for by the US. A more equal burden-sharing, particularly in Europe’s eastern and southern peripheries, could thereby leverage strategic convergence between Germany, the EU, and the US in and beyond the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

With its Indo-Pacific Guidelines, Germany has acknowledged the return of great power politics yet continued to advocate for the maintenance of the rules-based international order and multilateral cooperation. By reinforcing political and economic ties with value partners like Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, as well as the ASEAN states, it has sent a subtle yet powerful message towards China. Germany has not only adopted the Indo-Pacific narrative but set high standards for what it wants to achieve in the region, including around the retention of multipolarity. Yet the German Government remains necessarily cautious around engaging with the changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. German policymakers are yet to learn how to speak in the language of power. They will therefore continue to move relatively slowly and adapt both traditional and nontraditional foreign policy instruments to attempt to stay relevant in the 21st century’s centre of gravity.
The Netherlands has developed a unique perspective on the Indo-Pacific to support enhanced European Union engagement with the region. The Dutch and broader European push for a more comprehensive policy approach is the product of changing power dynamics within the international system, chiefly the shift in the world’s centre of gravity to the Indo-Pacific and the rising role and influence of China.

Released in November 2020, the Dutch government’s Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia (the Guidelines) followed the French and German Indo-Pacific strategies. The Guidelines clarify Dutch strategic thinking and policies and were designed as a building block towards the EU strategy announced six months later. They called for the Netherlands and the EU to improve and deepen their interactions with the region. Just two years prior, the Netherlands was also a frontrunner in developing a more comprehensive and critical China policy ahead of the EU and other member states.

Stability in the Indo-Pacific depends on open trade routes through the seas and air, as well as submarine cable networks. Competition between great powers, especially in hotly contested areas like the South China Sea, is firmly outside the EU’s interest. While many regional states are growing at a healthy pace, the risk of geopolitical tension jeopardising the post-Covid-19 recovery is real. The EU has the potential to “[join] hands with the countries of the Indo-Pacific, the world’s primary growth region,” and to work as a balancing power in the region, giving other states a constructive partner with which they can jointly manage the mounting global tensions. Finally, cooperation with countries in the region is key to tackling global challenges, such as climate, pandemics, and poverty reduction. This also goes for a properly functioning international rules-based order.

**The Netherlands’ call to action**

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Dutch Guidelines are comprehensive in scope, covering six broad elements. The areas identified in the EU strategy largely overlap with these elements. To varying extents, the Netherlands has been active in this broad range of topics for decades already. What is significant today is the willingness to accept the Indo-Pacific as a political construct. The EU and member states were hesitant to do so earlier, when France – with its unique set of assets, interests, and capabilities in the region – was the first in Europe to engage with the concept. US engagement with the Indo-Pacific from 2018 also served as a call to action for the Netherlands, while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019 was instrumental as it showed the possibility of engaging with the Indo-Pacific without a politicised or confrontational approach.
Increased engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the world’s primary growth region, is needed in each of these domains to adequately promote European interests. The Indo-Pacific is vital for economic growth of the EU and its member states, as it is home to three out of the four largest economies outside the EU (China, Japan, and India). About 90 per cent of the next billion new middle class members will come from this region, and the digital economy is expected to grow threefold in the coming five years. For the Netherlands as a trading nation, and for the EU at large, Indo-Pacific stability is of utmost importance.

Within the Guidelines, there is an implicit drive to develop a more comprehensive and assertive indirect China policy that seeks to balance – but not constrain – China on the global stage. In addition, democratic values and liberal norms have been under increasing pressure in the region. As is made clear in the Guidelines: “[i]n a world where democracy, the rule of law, human rights, freedom, free trade and a properly functioning multilateral world order are increasingly under pressure, the Netherlands and the EU must join forces with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region and with ASEAN”.

There is occasionally strong wording and references to realpolitik, an active pursuit of strategic interests and “an endeavour in which power politics and principles can go hand in hand” in the Guidelines. Polls among Southeast Asia elites suggest that greater EU presence is welcomed in the region, where countries continue to grapple with China’s more assertive posture internationally. The number of people who believe that the EU will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance has grown in 2020 from already high levels.

The Guidelines received a warm reception abroad, as many experts saw them as an important step towards developing a more actively engaged EU-Indo-Pacific policy agenda. However, beyond the halls of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, the guidelines have generated relatively little debate in the Netherlands itself. This suggests that it may be difficult for policymakers to follow through on the stated objectives, as real discussion – in parliaments, with stakeholders and even the public – about the politically sensitive strategic choices that are required to get to meaningful action is hard to implement.

At the instigation of France, Germany, and the Netherlands, the debate in Brussels on an EU strategy started from the autumn of 2020, as the three countries put forward a confidential informal paper calling for EU engagement in the Indo-Pacific. An EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was subsequently announced in the EU Council Conclusions of April 2021, with a comprehensive Joint Communication of the EU High Representative and the European Commission to follow in September 2021.

The Netherlands will work in accordance with the EU strategy once it is released. This includes, for example, the geographical demarcation of the region, which was narrower in the Dutch Guidelines compared to the EU strategy. After all, the Guidelines were meant to spur EU action and synergies on policy making towards the region, which can make a difference in the region in the way the Netherlands alone cannot. The Guidelines will, however, continue to be of importance, as they highlight the particularities of the Dutch approach and the niche areas of concern which the Netherlands can best contribute to. They also serve as a much-needed push for more domestic debate.

**Meaningful action in the maritime domain**

Since the Indo-Pacific as a term has its roots in the maritime domain, it is hardly surprising that regional countries have primarily called on the EU and European countries to mount a greater maritime presence. The Dutch Guidelines correspondingly adopt newly assertive tone, with firm calls for engagement and activism from EU member states on violations of international law, such as the boundary disputes in the South China Sea and violations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Again, this shift is a response to China’s destabilising actions in the region.

The EU and its member states are increasingly more active in addressing security concerns in Asia. The Dutch Guidelines highlight the need for more cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific to “reduce tensions on trade issues, promote maritime security, and unhindered safe passage on shipping routes, and combat economic and cyber espionage and cyberattacks on vital infrastructure.” In addition, the Netherlands has also shown an interest in engaging in capacity-building with partners in the region, to equip them with better ability to address security concerns.
Some Indo-Pacific countries, such as India and Japan, have also called for a greater European military presence. As momentum for increased security and military engagement increases, the Netherlands is now seriously considering what this will look like. The most notable manifestation of the changing Dutch and broader European approach to Indo-Pacific security is an increasing naval presence in the region. In May 2021 the Netherlands sent the frigate HNLMS Evertsen to accompany a UK Carrier Strike Group on its mission to Japan. Along the way, it also made a diplomatic stop to Indonesia, which is key to maritime security due to its geographically strategic position in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea.

The Evertsen voyage demonstrates the Netherlands Ministry of Defence is on board with Indo-Pacific engagement, after initial hesitation. The decision to contribute to ‘naval signalling’ is based on the sober assessment that Europe will have to deliver where demand is the greatest if Indo-Pacific engagement is to be taken seriously. However, this more assertive posture still has domestic critics. Some Dutch experts continue to assert that the Netherlands and other Europeans should not go out of their way to alienate China. Although domestic tides are certainly turning in favour of increased security and military activity in the Indo-Pacific, domestic restraints on these actions may remain.

A Dutch core interest: The digital domain

Digital connectivity is another important area of Dutch-European engagement with the Indo-Pacific. It gets to the heart of the US-China technology conflict and China’s current dominant role in the regional digital economy. China’s Digital Silk Road brings economic benefits to consumers, but also challenges democratic norms, the rule of law, human rights, freedom, free trade, and a well-functioning multilateral world order.

The Indo-Pacific is a key region where technological and market standards are being set. These standards will shape the competitiveness of European companies, as well as governance norms, where democracies increasingly compete with digitally empowered authoritarian states. For example, secure and ethical use of smart city applications and data by authorities must be ensured, lest they contribute to far-going digital surveillance.

The digital domain is a more of a focus of the Dutch Guidelines than French and German equivalents. This reflects Dutch expertise in the cyber domain and the economic capacity and regulatory influence of Europe. The Guidelines call for strengthening cooperation and dialogue on cyber security and digital connectivity. They commit to building on recent and longer-standing efforts, such as the Netherlands-Indonesia Cyber Policy Dialogue and Dutch digital development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, including courses on building cyber capacity in ASEAN countries.

However, there is a need, and potential, for more action in this field. Data regulation in the platform economy, bilaterally and by way of digital trade agreements, deserve more policymaker attention. The long-term ambition should be for better connectivity between Europe and the Indo-Pacific’s digital markets – underpinned by interoperable data regulation, digital payments areas, and digital identities – to promote economic linkages and shared norms and standards. As the tech–conflict between the US and China becomes increasingly a shared concern, the fast-growing digital economy serves as an opportunity for greater multilateral collaboration.

Europe’s regulatory influence in the digital sphere is significant. The extraterritorial effects of the EU General Data Protection Regulations have been surprisingly large. Many countries reference them when producing their own data protection regulations. The EU can draw inspiration from this success to strengthen dialogues with Indo-Pacific countries on other regulatory actions, such as devising trustworthy artificial intelligence, managing digital markets (to balance innovation and fairness), digital services (to protect freedom of speech online), and data (to establish user control over digital identities). The Netherlands can certainly contribute to this field by, for example, leveraging its leading digital identification system, Digi-D, which enables a smooth and secure means of accessing digital government services for citizens.
Coordinating with like-minded partners

The Dutch approach to Indo-Pacific engagement is not value-neutral. Like the EU strategy, the Dutch Guidelines call for effective rules-based multilateralism and are generally inclusive in tone. But approaches and specific actions show clear preferences for collaborating with like-minded partners. Liberal and democratic norms and values are central to both the Dutch and broader European approach.

Keys partners the Netherlands seeks to cooperate with – and wants the EU to also cooperate with – are ASEAN and India. ASEAN and India are both mentioned eighteen times in the Dutch Guidelines (compared to China, which is mentioned thirteen times), and four and six times respectively in the Council Conclusions (compared to just one time for China). Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea are also explicitly mentioned as like-minded partners, as are Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Indian experts have expressed their wish that European engagement in the Indo-Pacific is strategically autonomous and informed by a genuine will to engage in the region, rather than about alignment and management of relations with the US. Meanwhile, ASEAN elites watch with caution the EU’s engagement with the ‘Quad’ dialogue, as any formal linkage with the grouping will be considered too contentious.

Set against this context, it is striking that while the Guidelines did not trigger questions from Dutch Parliament, the first Summit Meeting of the Quad on 12 March, 2021 did spark a question about possible alignment or cooperation with this body. In response, the Dutch government stated that it is open to explore cooperation “with the Quad and individual Quad members at EU-level”. Although no explicit moves have been taken in this direction, until now cooperation on shared interests in issue-based coalitions is feasible with the potential to focus on supply chains and climate.

Lastly, while NATO is increasingly concerned with China, a NATO presence in the Indo-Pacific is not under consideration in European circles. Nor is it desirable to Indo-Pacific countries, as this would seriously antagonise China. The Netherlands does see benefit in the EU linking to NATO partnerships in the region that have been strengthened in recent years with New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, and Australia in particular. This extends also to the digital realm, where the NATO Cyber Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence is developing closer relations with these four countries. Efforts of individual EU member states, such as that of the Netherlands Defence Cyber Command, complement this.

Conclusion

As EU High Representative Josep Borrell stated during his visit to Jakarta in June 2021: “The EU’s interest is precisely this: that the regional order stays open and rules-based”. As the Netherlands and EU embark on their own distinctive strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific, they look to contribute to an open, safe, and inclusive region – on land, at sea and in the digital space – and to engage with the region’s thriving economies to ensure democratic standards are upheld.

Policymakers and experts in the region will welcome the Dutch and EU turn to the Indo-Pacific if it helps countries in the region maintain their ability to act autonomously and avoid being forced into a binary choice between the great powers. However, in addition to discussions with international partners, the Dutch Guidelines and EU strategy must also promote discussions in Dutch political and public circles. After all, politically sensitive strategic decisions will need to be made as the country – along with the EU and other member states – moves from written intentions to meaningful action in the Indo-Pacific.
CHAPTER 5.
THE UK IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO LARGE AMBITIONS

VEERLE NOUWENS

Speaking at the 2018 Munich Security Conference, former British Prime Minister Theresa May identified the two complementary themes of security and prosperity that would drive British foreign policy under its post-Brexit identity of ‘Global Britain’. The UK would pursue this role by building on its influence as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, as well as membership of the G7, G20, NATO, Five Eyes, and 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), as well as its network of Commonwealth nations and overseas territories. It would also build on its bilateral relationship with the United States and other key partners.

Already in 2018, the Indo-Pacific as a centre of global economic and political influence was squarely in focus as a priority region of UK national interest and a region where it sought to play a greater role. However, the fast-changing nature of the global environment requires the UK to go beyond ‘tried and tested methods’ to exert its influence.

The framework for Indo-Pacific engagement has now been outlined in the UK’s Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy and Defence Command Paper. Opportunities for expanding UK influence in the region abound, but they are not without their challenges.

Pursuing prosperity and security in the Indo-Pacific

In 2018, the UK government indicated its consideration of acceding to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade agreement. UK exports to the CPTPP member countries are expected to rise by 65 percent by 2030, equating to £37 billion. According to the UK Government, accession would ensure that 80 percent of UK trade is covered by free trade agreements and that the UK sits at the heart of a network of countries committed to free trade and the rules underpinning international commerce.

The Indo-Pacific already accounts for 17.5 percent of UK global trade, and 10 percent of inwards foreign direct investment. The global geoeconomic shift to the region is reflected in various studies that have projected that the Asia-Pacific alone may account for over 50 percent of global GDP between 2040 and 2050, and drive 40 percent of the world’s consumption. This adds to the oft-cited importance of the region as the global thoroughfare for energy and trading shipping lanes.

Prosperity, however, thrives on stability. The Indo-Pacific, no matter how it’s viewed geographically, faces a host of challenges, from transnational organised crime to maritime insecurity, territorial disputes, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and environmental and climate change. Conflict in this part of the world stands to impact European security and prosperity directly and indirectly.

The UK shares the unifying concern of other countries who have adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy: China’s increasing assertiveness and what it means to the rules-based international order. The Integrated Review notes ‘China’s increasing power and international assertiveness is likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s’. China is now deemed a ‘systemic competitor’ and ‘systemic challenge to… [the UK’s] security, prosperity and values’. The Defence Command Paper, released shortly after the Integrated Review, delivers the same message, focussing on China’s military modernisation and growing naval and air power, underlining the challenge to the UK from potential ripple-effects beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

This, however, does not preclude cooperation between the UK and China on global challenges such as climate change and trade and investment. Indeed, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has cautioned against descending into a ‘position of unthinking Sinophobia’.

Like other European countries, the UK will need to carefully balance its interests, values, and objectives in the Indo-Pacific.

Interests, ideals, and intentions

The UK’s interest in the Indo-Pacific has been growing in recent years, even if under the geographic banner of the ‘Asia-Pacific’. The 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) underscored the importance of the Asia-Pacific’s rising economic and political significance, as well as increased tension in the region. In 2016, then-Director for Asia Pacific in the Foreign Commonwealth Office, Stephen Little, noted the UK was undergoing its own rebalance to Asia.

The overwhelming tone of engagement with Beijing, not long after the UK-China ‘Golden Era’ in 2015, stands in marked contrast to the bilateral relationship today. Policy responses to issues around Huawei, Hong Kong, and human rights, as well as Parliament’s increased scrutiny on China policy, are case in point of a new and more China-sceptic turn.
The enhanced, multi-faceted challenge that China – and other authoritarian states like Russia - poses to the Indo-Pacific and the UK alike has helped shift the perspective on competition from one that was neatly defined by ‘war and peace as binary states’ to one that employs ‘a wider range of tools – such as economic statecraft, cyber-attacks, disinformation, and proxies’ under the threshold of conflict or open confrontation. The UK now sees competition in the Indo-Pacific playing out ‘in regional militarisation [across all domains], maritime tensions, and a contest over the rules and norms linked to trade and technology’.

Accordingly, the UK’s identified interests lie in upholding an international order based on free trade and open societies. As Prime Minister Johnson remarked in 2020, the UK’s post-Brexit logic is outward-looking, “championing global free trade now when global free trade needs a global champion.” In addition to the earlier mentioned application to accede to the CPTPP, the UK has ratified or is in the process of agreeing to 27 new free trade agreements across the Indo-Pacific.

Underscoring all activity is a strong belief that the UK as a global power will remain committed to its values against a worrying trend of ‘systemic competition’ between democratic and authoritarian systems of government and their accompanying values. The UK’s interests and its values are closely aligned. The Integrated Review singles out the values of universal human rights, the rule of law, transparency, free speech, and fairness and equality, which the UK will continue to protect and promote around the world. However, as in the case of China, it also notes that the UK’s approach will be realistic and adapted to circumstances. This may seem unrealistic, but it cannot be denied that even in seeking a core Indo-Pacific policy priority like attaining a post-Brexit Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN, the UK has not shied away from sanctioning individuals in Myanmar following the recent coup. China has likewise been met with sanctions for gross human rights violations in Xinjiang.

While the overall tone of the Integrated Review was modest in how the UK could go about pursuing its interests, the ultimate objective was anything but. “By 2030”, it reads, “we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values.”

The UK seeks to “do more to reinforce parts of the international architecture that are under threat; and shape the international order of the future by working with others.” It has already made encouraging progress. The UK has become the first country to gain ASEAN Dialogue Partnership in 25 years, and it has now formally applied for CPTPP membership. It has also sought to play a convening role, engaging more with Indo-Pacific middle powers and countries that share its values and interests. For example, the UK invited South Korea, Australia, India, and South Africa – all democratic Indo-Pacific countries – to the recent G7 Summit. The resulting Summit statement for the first time ever spoke of shared concerns over the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, while mentioning other concerns related to China. While earlier proposals by the UK had envisioned a G7+3 (or ‘Democratic 10’) adding South Korea, Australia, and India! alliance to diversify aware from Chinese 5G and other tech in national infrastructures, the Summit officially launched Biden’s idea of an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative through the Build Back Better World initiative.

The parallel approach of engaging in existing multilateral architecture while simultaneously launching initiatives and furthering cooperation through ‘minilateral’ groupings of partners and allies is likely to characterise the UK’s policy towards the region. It offers a flexible approach to expand its influence through investing in regional institutions that have regional buy-in, while moving the needle on practical policy coordination through small coalitions of interested countries.

The UK approach to the Indo-Pacific will particularly focus on ‘non-traditional’ areas of security that directly impact the key pillar of ‘sovereignty’ that runs throughout the Integrated Review. The Review noted the UK must adapt its statecraft to a new era to help shape the international order. This includes areas of diplomacy that focus on regulatory affairs, science and technology, cyber security, national security, dispute resolution, and legal and data-driven development.

The UK also seeks to increase its defence and security role in the Indo-Pacific. The Integrated Review highlighted the deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier to the Indo-Pacific to showcase Britain’s cutting-edge military power, as well as strengthen diplomatic and prosperity links. The Review was thin, however, on details. The Defence Command Paper provided more insight into UK plans, which have since already been formally announced and will soon be actualised.
While there is a great deal of focus on new technologies and domains like space, cyber, and artificial intelligence, the Command Paper also laid out some upcoming physical assets and personnel that would offer the UK a forward presence in the region. These include the inaugural deployment of the Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21), two Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs), a Littoral Response Group from 2023, Type-31 frigates later in the decade, and a new British Defence Staff in Canberra to coordinate defence engagement in the region alongside the British Defence Staff in Singapore. This would build on the UK’s existing relationships through the Five Eyes Alliance and FPDA, as well as the UK’s existing presence in the Indian Ocean Region and Southeast Asia, with a range of defence facilities in Kenya, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Diego Garcia, Singapore, and Brunei.

Forging a networked approach: partnerships old and new

The Integrated Review notes countries that are of particular importance to the UK’s Indo-Pacific engagement. None are stated to be more valuable than the relationship with the United States. The UK has sought to strengthen transatlantic relations on the Indo-Pacific with the United States, with the two countries affirming their special relationship through a New Atlantic Charter in 2021, coordinating official statements on issues of concern and sanctions, and increasing military interoperability and collaboration in the Indo-Pacific.

The other countries of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (‘Quad’) – Japan, India, and Australia – are also key. The Integrated Review noted Japan was one of the UK’s “closest strategic partners, including on security” and the relationship is set to deepen further. The UK’s relationship with Australia is even closer as a fellow member of the Five Eyes’ intelligence sharing framework, as a defence and foreign policy partner, as well as a member of the Commonwealth. The relationship with India, meanwhile, is arguably one which will need further investment. This could be advanced through the 2030 Roadmap for India-UK future relations launched in May 2021.

The Integrated Review also specifically mentions the geopolitical importance of middle powers and the strength and influence they generate when acting in concert. This could apply to countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, but also further afield in South Africa, Kenya, and Oman.

Although the UK’s ambitions clearly go beyond the Indian Ocean region, its experience, defence assets, and partnerships along the littorals of the Indian Ocean could be leveraged to play a stronger role in this vital part of the Indo-Pacific. The UK may be able to act as a framework nation for greater future European engagement in the region. The fact that Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen has formed part of the CSG21 deployment to the Indo-Pacific indicates a desire for such cooperation. Supporting and joining French – or British-led, rather than American – deployments might offer European nations a way of participating in defence and security operations while avoiding accentuating US-China strategic rivalry.

France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the European Union have all issued Indo-Pacific strategies, guiding documents, or frameworks alongside the UK. When taken together with other complementary initiatives on quality infrastructure, vaccines, cyber, and maritime security, the opportunities for coordination and cooperation are numerous. Combined with the existing or evolving strategies of key partners in the Indo-Pacific, the UK can pursue a networked approach to tackling issues and values in a flexible way. From a defence perspective, this also offers opportunities for further interoperability and burden sharing across the region.

Can the UK ‘walk and chew gum’ in the Indo-Pacific?

Embarking on an Indo-Pacific tilt as ‘Global Britain’ offers the UK flexibility, but it is also not without challenges. While commentators in the Indo-Pacific broadly welcomed the Integrated Review and Defence Command, questions remain. Chief among these is how the UK will be able to stretch its resources so widely. Although the defence budget received a significant boost in 2020, the UK’s economy has been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, though also by Brexit. The two strategy documents underscore additional challenges the UK must seek to address, including the immediate threat of Russia. The UK’s naval assets will also be stretched in coming years. While it has six Type-45 destroyers, the Royal Navy’s frigates are set to fall from thirteen to ten and only one third of those vessels will reportedly be available for operation at any time. This strengthens the need for the UK to double down on burden sharing with key Indo-Pacific allies and partners.
Experts have welcomed the choice to deploy two OPVs to the Indo-Pacific as a cost-effective tool that “sends a clear message that Britain is committing to the region”\textsuperscript{137}. The fact they will be permanently stationed in the region and focussed on practical cooperation and training at sea offers a less confrontational approach than the establishment of a new or reinforced military base. More serious hardware including frigates, destroyers, and aircraft carriers are available if required. And yet the Defence Command Paper makes no secret of the UK’s intention to uphold freedom of navigation\textsuperscript{138}.

The UK will need to balance its interests with its values without losing sight of wider regional strategic objectives. Countries in the Indo-Pacific will be closely watching, for example, how the UK’s China policy evolves over time and whether economic considerations might be made a policy priority. This will require careful strategic messaging. So too will the UK’s overall approach to the Indo-Pacific. While the Integrated Review and Command Paper offered a promising glimpse into a more calculated and humbled approach to the Indo-Pacific, they are ideally only a start. Many countries, particularly on Africa’s eastern coast, are yet to have a strong understanding of this new strategic arena and what their role in it might be\textsuperscript{139}. This will be particularly important if the UK is to pursue an enhanced role in the Indian Ocean and capitalise on its defence assets and partnerships in the region.

Wherever the UK ventures in the Indo-Pacific, it will not be the only European country to do so. Indeed, France – a resident European power in region – has a significant diplomatic, economic, and defence presence centred especially around its overseas territories in the Western Indian Ocean and South Pacific. Individual European states and the EU are also seeking opportunities to leverage their existing engagement and find new areas of cooperation. With so many overlapping interests, there is an imperative to avoid duplication of efforts and collaborate. But there is also a concern that the prevailing mood, particularly post-Brexit, might be one of competition.

These challenges can be overcome with sufficient political will and resources. In 2016, referring to the UK’s then ‘All of Asia’ policy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Director for Asia Stephen Little remarked that when it came to the region, “Brits can walk and chew gum”\textsuperscript{140}. In a new framing around the Indo-Pacific, the UK is off to a very promising start, but time will be the ultimate test.
CHAPTER 6.
PROSPECTS FOR JAPANESE-EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC
RYOSUKE TANAKA

The ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) concept has been central to recent Japanese diplomacy. The concept’s origins stretch back to the 2000s, and Japan officially adopted FOIP Strategy in 2016. FOIP’s emphasis on enhanced cooperation with regional partners has also provided an opening for improved relations with Europe, and reflects Japan’s own Indo-Pacific interests. This has been characterised by alignment of strategies between the European Union and Japan in areas such as connectivity, as well as security-based relations with individual European nations. The future priorities for the relationship include advancing the values and policies of Japan, Europe, and the United States through the G7, and cooperating in connectivity and maritime security based on the affinity between the Indo-Pacific policies of Japan and the EU, while promoting cooperation with willing and able states, especially in security affairs.

The origins, objectives, and future of FOIP

Japan’s Indo-Pacific policy originated in Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, titled “Confluence of the Two seas”. This defined the concept of “a broader Asia” linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and envisaged the spread of value-based diplomacy in the region by pursuing the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity concept. In August 2016, Abe announced Japan’s FOIP Strategy, following a decade of policy evolution. This broadened the horizon to include not only “two oceans” but “two continents”: namely “a broader Asia” and Africa. By 2019 there were three established pillars of FOIP: promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade, pursuit of economic prosperity, and commitment for peace and stability.

An unwritten priority of the FOIP concept has been managing the rise of China. The refinement of FOIP following the inauguration of the second Abe government in 2012 coincided with China expanding its global influence under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. Around 2013, China announced plans for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These began to take shape around 2015-16, when China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea was also growing.

The underlying goal of the Abe administration’s FOIP diplomacy was a stable relationship with China. Japan sought strategic balance with the assistance of international partners. This prioritised maintaining a solid Japan-US alliance, and using the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the ‘Quad’) to engage Australia and India. Japan also sought to maintain favourable relations with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries by respecting ASEAN centrality.

Official framing of the FOIP concept shifted from labelling it a ‘strategy’ to a ‘vision’ around 2017. This was intended to present it as a shared outlook for regional countries, and make it less China-focused and thus more accessible to ASEAN members. The change may also have been influenced by a rapprochement in Japan-China relations. In 2018, Abe and Xi declared the relationship as back to normal following a summit meeting. Ongoing prospects for Japanese-Chinese cooperation, largely through the BRI, raised US concern during the confrontational Trump administration. This persists in the Joe Biden era, yet it is overshadowed by a need for continued cooperation on China’s more aggressive actions.

China’s assertive diplomacy in the wake of COVID-19 has reenergised FOIP support. China’s domestic problems in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and assertiveness on Taiwan and other external issues, are major concerns for the Biden administration. Such challenges have also seen the post-Abe Japanese government of Suga Yoshihide effectively pause the pursuit of improved relations with China. The Japan-US summit of April 2021 reaffirmed the importance of the FOIP concept and a shared recognition of the China threat.

While Europe is not within the Indo-Pacific geographically, Japan’s FOIP has also strengthened relations with it. This is because of European governments’ own more recent adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies, which has allowed alignments with Japan’s FOIP. This has progressed to the point that Europe has now been ‘mainstreamed’ in Japanese diplomacy. This has two main elements: cooperation with the European Union and cooperation with individual countries. The former has largely occurred through the harmonisation of FOIP with various blocwide strategies towards the Indo-Pacific. The latter has largely occurred in the bilateral security cooperation space.
Japan’s response to Europe’s Indo-Pacific policy

Closer Japan-European Union ties were a key objective of Japan’s first National Security Strategy, published in 2013. The Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement/Strategic Partnership Agreement (EPA/SPA) negotiations began in the same year, and resulted in an agreement in principle in 2017, meaning that the negotiations on tariffs and rules in key areas have been settled, leaving only a few minor issues and legal checks to be completed. The EPA stipulates a wide range of economic cooperation, including investment rules and intellectual property as well as tariffs, while the SPA provides for cooperation in a wide range of strategic areas, such as promoting democracy and human rights, and promoting cooperation in maritime affairs, cyber affairs, and counterterrorism. The EPA and SPA are complementary and provide the basis for an enhanced Japan-EU relationship.

Europe maintained good economic relations with China for much of the period in which the FOIP concept was being developed. However, from around 2016, Europe began to reassess relations with Beijing due to China’s growing political and economic influence and challenges associated with it. The results include the EU’s Connecting Europe and Asia report of 2018, which highlighted Europe’s approach to connectivity and alluded to problems with the BRI; and a statement on the EU’s “systemic rivalry” with China in the EU-China: Strategic Outlook report of 2019. This recognised that the EU’s connectivity strategy is highly compatible with Japan’s FOIP initiative. Moreover, the EU referred to the “Indo-Pacific” for the first time when concluding this partnership. This pointed to a common understanding of the region developing between Japan and the EU.

The Council of the EU announced in April 2021 it would design an EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, to be published by the end of the year. This will be a comprehensive update of previous documents, including the above-mentioned connectivity strategy, and previously published maritime security and Asia security strategies. The EU will also develop an inclusive strategy for partners wishing to cooperate based on “shared principles, values or mutual interest”. The EU stance broadly aligns with Japan’s FOIP principle of facilitating cooperation with any country holding shared values.

The 27th EU-Japan Summit in May 2021 produced further momentum for the relationship. Prime Minister Suga welcomed the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy. A Japanese statement noted Japan and the EU must raise a united voice against those that undermine the values of FOIP. Subsequent statements confirmed the China-centric focus of this declaration, by mentioning attempts to change the status quo in South China Sea and East China Sea, the human rights situation in China, and the stability of cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Japan and the EU also confirmed they supported ASEAN unity and centrality, as well as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and wished to cooperate with it as the most important institution in the region.

The summit communiqué’s mention of respecting international rules on debt-sustainability is tacitly connected to BRI. It also refers to cooperation in the “industrial, science, research and innovation and space sectors”, which can again be viewed in light of China’s rise in these areas.

However, there are significant obstacles to building stronger Japan-EU relations. Firstly, negotiations with the EU require the agreement of all member states. There are inevitably limitations to issues on which all EU member states can agree, particularly in cases where relations with China must be considered. Secondly, the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy has significant limitations in the security field, because the EU needs unanimous approval to implement its security policy, and some members may take an uncooperative stance. Japan would welcome the expansion of the EU’s “meaningful naval presence” in the Indo-Pacific, as stated in the council of the EU document on EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet both Japan and the EU do not currently envisage military cooperation in the more sensitive waters around China.
Japan-Europe cooperation on security

Progress on security cooperation between Japan and Europe is more likely to occur at a nation-to-nation level. It will inevitably focus on the South and East China Seas most vital to Japanese interests. Japan’s bilateral cooperation with European countries in these areas has itself been politically and militarily unrealistic in the past because of their lack of capability and ties with Beijing. Yet it has seen considerable progress in recent years, particularly with UK and France.

Cooperation between Japan and the UK began with a joint statement issued by Abe and then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012. Cooperation between Japan and France began with a joint statement between Abe and then President François Hollande in 2013. Since then, Japan’s bilateral ties with both countries have been institutionalised, including the establishment of the Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meetings (2+2), defence equipment development, Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreements, and Agreements on the Security of Information, which ensures the reciprocal protection of classified information exchange. Since 2018, both the UK and France have also been conducting joint training exercises with Japan and the US on both sea and land. This growing security cooperation trend is inevitably also related to China. The UK and France have gradually increased their Indo-Pacific military presence and partnerships in line with their growing concerns about China have grown.

Conversely, the China factor remains one of the reasons why cooperation between Japan and Germany, as one of the European 3 (E3), has not progressed to the same extent. Japan and Germany held their first 2+2 meeting in 2021, and concluded an Agreement on the Security of Information. However, it remains difficult for Germany to take a hard line on China because of its deep economic relations. This is in addition to Germany’s lack of a diplomatic culture based on military power, which already creates difficulties in developing a more expansive security approach.

Several obstacles must be overcome if Japan-UK and Japan-France cooperation is to continue advancing. The first of these is a lack of understanding as to how these non-treaty-bound relationships will respond to real threats in the Indo-Pacific, including in ‘grey zone’ situations. Second, there are legitimate concerns around how involvement by European countries with limited regional assets might assist in the main Japanese priority of deterring Chinese aggression. The major advantage may be in enhancing the sense of strategic ambiguity which already surrounds possible responses to Chinese actions.

The China factor in Japan-Europe cooperation

Whether at the EU or national level, the increasing recognition of China’s growing influence has been the fundamental driver of Japanese cooperation with Europe in the Indo-Pacific. There are, however, still differences of strategic priority between the two parties on China. Japan is, for example, far more preoccupied with the imminent security threat, whereas European governments remain more concerned with human rights issues such as the crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

This misalignment can be attributed to the fact that, although concerns around China have brought Japan and Europe together, development of their respective Indo-Pacific policies occurred in almost diametrically opposed fashions. Japan’s FOIP shifted from the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity – which caused concerns that its objective was to exclude countries that did not share its values, such as China – to one that aims to maintain an open and inclusive regional order and not target a particular country. Europe’s Indo-Pacific engagement, on the other hand, shifted from a policy of encouraging broad regional economic cooperation to a more normative, and even geopolitical, one. These differences mean the two sides have different degrees of exposure to China challenges. Regardless of Chinese policy, it is unavoidable for Japan to prioritise China and the Indo-Pacific, given its geography and strategic interdependencies. However, Europe’s China policy can change its intensity more easily, depending on the actions China takes. For Japan the Indo-Pacific is innate, but for Europe the degree of involvement in the region might be still a matter of choice.

Such differences are inescapable, but they are also manageable through creative diplomacy. Japan and Europe largely remain likeminded partners when it comes to priorities for the Indo-Pacific. China’s assertiveness in recent years has also narrowed their differences. The key to a successful future relationship will be ensuring a mutual appreciation for these differences and enhancing cooperation in various spaces.
Potential avenues for future Japan–Europe cooperation

One of the most important multilateral frameworks through which Japanese–European cooperation can advance is the G7. This provides an ideal forum for pursuing their shared interests, alongside those of the US. The 2021 summit in the UK not only confirmed the importance of a rules-based international order but aligned perceptions on China-focused issues, such as human rights and Taiwan. In this sense, it is necessary for Japan to show some contribution to the human rights diplomacy pursued by the US and Europe. The Asia-Europe Meeting should also be used as an important platform to cooperate between Japan and Europe to buttress the liberal order in the Indo-Pacific.

While some frameworks for Japan-US and EU-US cooperation have already been established, the framework for Japan-EU cooperation is still in its infancy. Connectivity and supply chain resilience are some areas where they can further enhance cooperation. There is room to work together in establishing connectivity in the vast region from Africa to South East Asia, even extending to the Pacific. Japan and the EU will also maintain and even expand their maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. They share a history of maritime security cooperation, including in previous anti-piracy operations, and in 2021, the Japan-EU Joint naval exercise and joint port call on Djibouti were conducted. Furthermore, CRIMARIO II, the EU’s initiative for the protection of the critical sea lanes, could be extended to the Pacific Ocean, and Japan has the potential to cooperate with the initiative through its Maritime Domain Awareness approach.

A more China-focused security policy is likely to involve the UK, France, and other European countries with the will and capacity to join the US-Japan framework. Though the UK and France have already concluded some agreements with Japan in security policy, further frameworks such as the reciprocal access agreement could be concluded. This is currently under negotiation between Japan and the UK, which would facilitate mutual troop visits. Similar agreements with France and other European countries remain a possibility and could help to improve interoperability through more frequent joint training.
In an era of global connectivity and contest, European engagement with the strategic challenges and opportunities of the Indo-Pacific is being welcomed by many countries. Prominent among them is Australia, one of the first states to champion the Indo-Pacific as a useful regional construct. From Canberra’s perspective, the question is not whether to encourage a more substantial European role in this region’s future, but what shape that role should most effectively take – and how best to help.

In the 2020s, European policy ambitions in the region should be informed by the need to maintain an order where power is tempered by principles, where the rights and interests of all nations are respected, and where short-term commercial imperatives do not occlude strategic balance or democratic values. At that same time, there are risks of excessive expectations. European nations will have difficulty sustaining their Indo-Pacific strategies if those detract from addressing problems close to home, and especially if a key measure of success becomes the projection of military power.

The opportunity for Australia is twofold. The first element should be to deepen its comprehensive cooperation with European partners – bilaterally with France, Germany, and Britain, and collectively with the European Union. Second, Canberra can help its European friends navigate the region’s geopolitical and geoeconomic currents to achieve an effective coalition effort to ensure that nations in Southeast Asia, the southwest Pacific, and the Indian Ocean have viable alternatives to accepting China’s dominance over their developmental and security futures. This need remains especially compelling at a time when countries across the region are struggling to regain economic momentum, social cohesion, health security and the protection of sovereignty, amid such ubiquitous conditions as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate and resource pressures, and US-China rivalry.

Europe’s new engagement with the Indo-Pacific has been widely anticipated and observed. For the first part of this century, most European powers were reluctant to look at Asia through a prism of strategic contestation and great power relations. This was due to a combination of ‘holiday from history’ optimism about the conflict-reducing effects of economic interdependence and an eagerness to pursue commercial opportunity, particularly from the rapid rise of China. In 2004, for instance, the EU came close to lifting its post-Tiananmen arms embargo against China, with US pressure and human rights concerns the main obstacles. At a diplomatic level, European hopes for the strengthening of Asia-centric institutions were reflected in multilateral dialogue mechanisms, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), that relied on assumptions about converging interests and worldviews among diverse Asian states. Peace, prosperity, and cooperation on shared challenges seemed the order of the day, if not the century. Either that, or where strategic tensions persisted, they could be managed regionally, or through American primacy, or tolerated as not ultimately a problem for Europeans.

This picture dramatically changed in the late 2010s. Even as it became clear that China and other powers in a rising Asia – notably India – were part of wider Indo-Pacific and global systems of connectivity, the dominant international dynamic shifted from cooperation to strategic tension. Europe’s proximate security landscape darkened, with Russian aggression, worsening conflicts in the Middle East, and cascading economic and political shocks damaging the European project.

But Europe could no longer overlook trouble further afield. Risk began to match, or even surpass, economic opportunity due to China’s rise. Beijing’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific had direct implications for the interests and values of European powers and the global order in which they had staked so much. For instance, China’s threats to freedom of navigation and the rule of international law in the South China Sea placed at risk the interests of all maritime trading powers and undermined the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. China’s military modernisation was rapidly beginning to affect the global balance of power. Moreover, Beijing and Moscow were emboldening one another by testing and crossing American ‘red lines’ – over Ukraine and the South China Sea – without great penalty. Internally, the persecution of the Uyghur community in Xinjiang had frightening resonance for a Europe with 20th century memory of genocide.

Meanwhile, the vicissitudes of American power and credibility, especially under the Trump administration, awoke Washington’s allies and partners worldwide to the need to do more to help themselves and one another. Along with Japan, Australia showed a high degree of initiative in encouraging arrangements that leveraged the scale and multipolarity of the Indo-Pacific region to balance or at least dilute China’s power, including through new minilateral security groupings and salvaging what had been the Trans-Pacific Partnership on free trade. Europe began to take note and adjust its own policies. This began with France – an Indo-Pacific territorial power – as elucidated by President Macron in a speech in Sydney in 2018.
Australia’s Indo-Pacific vision

Macron’s choice of venue was fitting, not only because Australia was becoming a major industry partner – or, more precisely, buyer – for French submarine technology. Australia had been a pioneer in developing and utilising the Indo-Pacific concept as a framework for foreign and defence policy in a new era. The 2013 Australian Defence White Paper was the first published policy document of any nation to formally designate its region of strategic interest as a system of economic ties and power projection spanning the two oceans. The provenance and character of this redefinition of a maritime Asia-centric region is elaborated elsewhere. Academic debate will long continue as to whether the Indo-Pacific is an analytical construct more or less valid than the equally manufactured term ‘Asia-Pacific’ from the late 20th century. But the reality is that by the early 2020s, variants on the Indo-Pacific had been rapidly adopted by many nations as the dominant definition of the world’s strategic, economic, and demographic centre of gravity. The popularisation of this concept has been a quiet success for Australia as an activist middle power and ideational entrepreneur.

Why was Australia an early mover in recognising both the realities and the advantages of this reimagined regional home? Most obviously, the Indo-Pacific is Australia’s place. Here was a demarcation of the region that, unlike simply ‘Asia’, included Australia by definition. But this was not simply some convenient or arbitrary choice. Australian officials were early to recognise the vital importance of the flows of trade, energy, investment, people, and security capability that were breaking down late 20th century barriers between a Pacific-centric East Asian or Asia-Pacific region and a South Asian theatre restricted to the Indian Ocean. Not only was India becoming an outward-looking power, and being embraced as such by many of the United States, but China was staking much of its economic and political stability on its access to the Indian Ocean – the sea lanes for its oil lifelines, soon to be recast as the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in Xi Jinping’s One Belt One Road (later Belt and Road) strategy. The Asia with which Australia was engaging was wide, multipolar, and maritime.

In the years that followed, China’s increasingly affronting assertiveness confirmed in Australian policy minds the reality of the Indo-Pacific as a zone of strategic competition. Moreover, the distinct character of the region included some of the ingredients for limiting or balancing Chinese power: it was too large for any empire – new or old – to dominate and engaged the interests of many players across collapsed geographic boundaries. Thus, for instance, Australia could encourage creative coalitions with a wider range of partners than previously, such as India and Japan. Europe, too, began to re-enter the Australian strategic imagination – not as a throwback to old eras of colonialism, world wars or Cold War, but as a capable and democratic source of new ‘like-mindedness’ in managing regional and global challenges alike. This became especially applicable in the Indo-Pacific as, in effect, the global region, where the interests of all major nations are engaged.

Principles for an antipodean entente

An easy criticism of the Indo-Pacific idea as a basis for international solidarity is the truism that no two countries have perfect alignment of interests or perspectives. Correspondingly, even definitions of the region’s boundaries vary. For instance, published policy documents suggest that Australia’s focus is on the core Indo-Pacific of maritime Southeast Asia, with much attention also to the ‘immediate approaches’ of the southwest Pacific and the eastern Indian Ocean, and much less to the western Indian Ocean – let alone the east coast of Africa. European powers, on the other hand, place substantial emphasis on the Indian Ocean, including the growing place of Africa as a zone of geopolitical contest and economic potential.

Likewise, when it comes to issues and contingencies of concern, national priorities and rhetoric will vary. Japan (since 2016) and the United States (since 2017) have frequently used the adjectives ‘Free and Open’ – capitalised for formal emphasis – to describe the regional order they seek to uphold. Australia has sometimes been less emphatic on those words and has emphasised free trade as well as freedom of navigation in its interpretation of them, although recently Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has begun more categorically to speak of “a world order that favours freedom”.

As France, the Netherlands, Germany, the European Union and, through its ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’ Britain, have begun to declare new regional policies, an analytical cottage industry has emerged among observers seeking to interpret the messaging of their declaratory documents. Just as Indo-Pacific sceptics accentuate the differences between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) Indo-Pacific ‘Outlook’ and the more forthright statements generated by the US-Japan-Australia-India ‘Quad’, it is not hard to fixate on differences between European and other viewpoints. Nor is it difficult to point out that chosen diplomatic rhetoric does not always fully accord with policy practice. The implication is plain: what is the value of high-sounding language about international
law, democracy, and anti-hegemony if it does not rapidly manifest in solidarity, balancing, and risk-taking deterrent measure vis-à-vis China, on issues like the South China Sea, Taiwan, or Hong Kong? Why bother taking a stand when it is going to involve hard work and sacrifice?

It is reasonable and useful to be reminded of such tensions. However, these are very early days in the 21st century European turn to the Indo-Pacific. And what is striking about the emerging European stances on the region’s challenges in not so much how they differ as how much they have in common with one another and with the positions of fully resident powers such as Australia, Japan, India, and Indonesia.

Just as all Indo-Pacific postures evince agreement on the geographic core of the region – the globally connective sea lanes and maritime Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea – so too is a bedrock of shared principles being unearthed. These include international law and norms, sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful resolution of differences, non-coercion, mutual respect, support for multilateralism, and recognition of multipolarity, including through appreciation of the diplomatic centrality of institutions based on ASEAN. Such commonalities span the recently stated Indo-Pacific policies of the EU, NATO, the G7 (and its partners South Korea, South Africa, India and Australial), Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and New Zealand, and the established positions of Australia, Japan, the United States, India, France, Indonesia, Taiwan and the 10 nations of ASEAN. Thus, as Australia, and others, seek to define the contours and prospects for partnership with Europe to advance Indo-Pacific stability and development, they have clear foundations of shared interests and principles on which to build. Notably, in his July 2021 speech framing the Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin emphasised how “joint efforts with our friends ... draw strength from common principles”.

**Promising partnerships**

Australia and European partners have been reasonably prompt in framing and seizing opportunities for Indo-Pacific cooperation. At first glance, Europe may not have seemed a priority for Canberra in this regard. As anticipated in the November 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, much of the initial effort of Canberra’s Indo-Pacific diplomacy was towards strengthening the new ‘small groups’ of minilateralism, notably the Quad with India, the US and Japan, as well as trilaterals among combinations of those four. Another early priority was working with Indonesia to socialise the Indo-Pacific idea within ASEAN and ASEAN-centric institutions such as the East Asia Summit. From 2018, the Pacific ‘Step Up’ became a major imperative; a comprehensive effort to strengthen Australia’s position as partner of choice for small states in Melanesia, in substantial part to limit China’s influence. All of this was overshadowed by a need to resist Beijing’s growing regional powerplay – including its interference within Australia – and concerns about US strategy under Trump. Canberra sought to encourage American regional resolve, while staying wary of overly confrontational approaches.

Where did Europe fit in this busy Australian horizon? Broad alignment developed briskly and naturally. Canberra had long recognised Europe through the lens of global partnership, for instance in countering transnational threats such as terrorism or protecting liberal institutions, rules, and norms. Britain was also an automatic partner through historic ties, the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, and the Five-Power Defence Arrangement [with Singapore, Malaysia, and New Zealand]. By the 2010s, France was readily recognised in Canberra as a significant force for stability and protection of the regional commons, with its territories and security presence in the Indian and Pacific oceans; differences over nuclear testing were long forgotten. Australia encouraged and supported France in making its regional policies more explicitly ‘Indo-Pacific’. Canberra welcomed the strategic dimension to French thinking, including the readiness to project as a global power and to warn openly against Chinese hegemony. In parallel, the first trilateral diplomatic arrangement to include Europe was the Australia-India-France dialogue, initially a 1.5 track hybrid of think tank experts and officials in 2018, but soon elevated to officials and then ministerial level.

Australia was also receptive to and encouraging of the acceleration of wider European interest in Indo-Pacific policies from 2019-2021. Germany, the Netherlands, and the EU collectively were taking note of the Indo-Pacific tide. They were recognising the way in which regional powers were shifting from a 1990s-style Asia-Pacific focus – excluding the Indian Ocean, emphasising trade and assuming a benign future with Beijing – to a more sober Indo-Pacific outlook incorporating China-centric geopolitical tensions, the rise of India, and a new sense of uncertainty and complexity. This was compounded by the realisation that the unsettling impacts of China’s global geoeconomic behaviour – such as the Belt and Road, technology competition, and cyber espionage – could not be separated from strategic assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.
Britain, too, awoke to these realities, even more rapidly and categorically. Its 2021 ‘tilt’ to the Indo-Pacific was also reinforced by its post-Brexit motivations to reassert itself independently as a global and maritime power. Strikingly, the harmful economic and societal impacts of COVID-19 have not fundamentally reduced European interest in engaging with the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Quite the contrary. The quiet understanding among European chanceries is that a systemic rivalry with China is emerging and can only be managed through a combination of resilience at home and proactive partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

Charting a course together

A mid-2021 Australian stocktake of Europe’s Indo-Pacific pivot reveals several key points. The EU, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom all have formally declared Indo-Pacific policies, involving various combinations on diplomatic, economic, developmental, and military engagement. All have subtexts of managing Chinese assertiveness, coordinating with but differentiating from America’s outright competition with China, and taking advantage of multipolarity by building creative webs of cooperation, including in each case specifically with Australia. On the other hand, each of these Indo-Pacific policy orientations, other perhaps than the French one, is still at a relatively early phase. How they will evolve and perform will depend in significant part on expectations – and expectation management.

The future navigational chart is becoming clearer. Opportunities are to build active coalitions of interests and values that advance two parallel objectives: discouraging coercive and destabilising behaviour in the strategic sphere, while contributing to the public goods requirements of the region’s many developing nations in the spheres of economics, technology, societal resilience (including public health) and environmental sustainability. Australia and its European partners need a balance of realism and ambition. Individually and collectively they can contribute to these goals, but promising too much too soon – and falling short or proving fitful in application – could be more damaging to their collective interest than staying aloof in the first place.

In practice this means taking a multi-layered approach to regional engagement and, in particular, not letting the whole game rise or fall on any one dimension of activity, not least military commitment. The trend towards European force projection in Indo-Pacific waters is welcome, from the regular French presence to the 2021 UK carrier strike group (with Dutch and American elements). Such visits will provide growing opportunities for Australian and European forces to conduct sophisticated naval exercises together. And it makes sense for Australian port visits to be included in these deployments, as will be the case when the German frigate Bayern visits Australia’s west coast in October 2021.

However, the biggest and most sustained difference Europe can make to the Indo-Pacific dynamic is likely to lie in an aggregate of non-military contributions. Although Europe’s strategic weight remains substantial, we can only anticipate that a relatively small proportion of it will ever be allocated to Indo-Pacific contingencies for any sustained time. Further, European diplomatic reputation and credibility is strong in this region, marked for instance by high levels of trust from Southeast Asian elites. Concerted diplomacy – especially in support of rules, norms, and international law – along with strategically directed development assistance will help bolster the resolve and capacity of small and medium powers to safeguard their own sovereignty in the face of blandishments or coercive signals from China. Such capacity may include military capability, civilian maritime forces, policing, surveillance, and intelligence, as well as reinforcing the antibodies of good governance and democracy. Developing nations in the Indo-Pacific may benefit from alternatives to Chinese infrastructure, technology, and financing, but may just as readily welcome improvements to their ability simply to scrutinise and assess Chinese proposals.

The challenge for Australia will be about coordination and deconfliction, a grand division of labour to minimise undue levels of Chinese influence over nations in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. This will also involve contributions from Japan, India, the US and, of course, self-help within and between the contested nations themselves. One way in which Canberra can help its European friends is in navigating the coalitions, local sensitivities, diplomatic cross-currents and fraught geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, where Australia’s decades of direct experience give it a hard-won head start.
India’s Indo-Pacific approach has continually evolved since Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled it at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. The Indian Government has progressively expanded its engagements in the region to address new challenges and bolster security. One of the critical pillars of Delhi’s Indo-Pacific approach is the pursuit of partnerships. As European nations such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom, as well as the European Union, implement their own Indo-Pacific policies, India will find growing convergences. There is a particularly strong opportunity in the maritime space, owing to shared interests and expertise in the areas of Maritime Domain Awareness and the blue economy. These are underpinned by mutual support for international rules and norms.

Maritime Domain Awareness

The Indo-Pacific is a vast geographic expanse. While India’s political, economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests and priorities span the entire region, its naval and military engagements, investments, and interests prioritise the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy plays a leading role in advancing India’s military diplomacy and maritime interests. Yet it also has a limited budget. The Indian Ministry of Defence allocates approximately 15 per cent of its defence budget to the Navy, which considers the expanse from the eastern coast of Africa to the straits of Malacca its area of primary interest.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has become a critical pillar of Delhi’s Indo-Pacific engagements. The Indian Navy defines MDA as being “cognizant of the position and intentions of all actors, whether own, hostile or neutral, and in all dimensions - on, over and under the seas.” No navy can maintain complete situational awareness over vast areas without partnerships. MDA by nature is most effective and achievable through collaboration, which stands true for India. India has launched several initiatives to build its own MDA capabilities. These include establishing mutual logistics exchanges, ‘white shipping’ agreements, an Indian Ocean coastal radar network, and the Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).

Mutual logistics exchange agreements with countries including the US, Australia, Japan, Singapore, France, and South Korea facilitate the Indian Navy’s presence and ability to undertake MDA missions across the Indo-Pacific. White shipping agreements, which focus on exchange of data on commercial shipping traffic, provide India awareness of movements and identity of vessels. This helps identify potential threats and risks emerging at sea. The coastal radar network complements Indian capacity building by strengthening coastal states’ ability to monitor and protect their vast exclusive economic zones. Finally, the IFC-IOR creates the platform for MDA at a regional level. The centre was “established with the vision of strengthening maritime security in the region and beyond, by building a common coherent maritime situation picture and acting as a maritime information hub for the region.”
As Delhi expands its MDA partnerships, there is scope for greater collaboration with countries such as the UK, Germany, and Norway. However, India’s closest maritime partnership, especially in the Indian Ocean, is with France. Both countries have consistently invested in collaborations in the maritime domain and each views the other as a critical partner in the Indo-Pacific. After the end of the Cold War, as American priorities shifted away from the region, India and France emerged as the two critical security players in the Indian Ocean. While India took a leading role in the northern and eastern Indian Ocean, France remained a key actor in the western Indian Ocean. There has been greater convergence in understanding the importance and stability of the Indian Ocean in both countries’ maritime engagements. This partnership today has taken on more strategic and active collaborations within the Indo-Pacific framework. Partnership with France has allowed India to overcome its traditionally limited presence in the western Indian Ocean, where it is seeking to increase engagement and presence. India and France have been working together to increase their ability to sustain and conduct complex missions. Delhi and Paris have formal partnerships such as the 2018 reciprocal logistics support agreement, which, among other things, allows mutual access to military facilities.

India and France also announced their intention to launch a series of satellites aimed at boosting MDA in the Indian Ocean in 2018. Access to France’s La Reunion island, through the logistics support agreement, has been a critical addition to India’s missions and presence in the southwest Indian Ocean. The first joint patrol was launched from La Reunion in 2020.

India is reportedly in talks with the UK to sign similar agreements to those with France. These include arrangements on logistics support, which would further strengthen India’s MDA interests and capabilities across the Indo-Pacific. As Germany looks toward the Indo-Pacific, there is scope for collaboration with India on issues of maritime security. The recent naval exercise between India’s INS Trikand frigate and the German frigate Bayern in the Gulf of Aden reflects mutual political will to find areas of convergence.

In addition to traditional areas of security such as anti-submarine warfare, India leads in responding to non-traditional threats such as natural and humanitarian disasters. Many of India’s MDA efforts, through white shipping agreements or the IFC-IOR, aim to address concerns of illegal fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and maritime terrorism.
Blue economy

The growing emphasis on 'blue economy' for sustainable development and preservation of marine ecosystems provides another avenue for Indian-European engagement. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, capacity building efforts aimed at protecting vast maritime zones, disaster management mechanisms, and responding to the effects of climate change are critical issues for many Indo-Pacific littoral and island states. To meaningfully engage with these countries, India and European powers will have to prioritise these issues and collaborate to find solutions.

India launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, to prioritise issues of maritime security through its engagement on issues of the blue economy. The initiative has seven key pillars: maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity and maritime transport. European nations such as France, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands also have considerable experience and expertise on developing sustainable frameworks for development. Moreover, the EU has dedicated frameworks and collaborations on blue economy among member states. Scandinavian nations in particular play a leading role in sustainable frameworks for development. Moreover, the EU has dedicated frameworks and collaborations on blue economy among member states. Indian nations in particular play a leading role in sustainable frameworks for development, with an eye on climate change, renewable energy, and sustainable fishing. These experiences, technical expertise, and frameworks are of immense value as India seeks to provide similar solutions at both the national and regional level. This convergence of interests and experiences are extremely valuable for Indo-Pacific small island and littoral countries as well.

In line with IPOI, India has partnered with France, to launch the International Solar Alliance (2015), and with a range of other nations to launch the Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure (2019). These aim to develop frameworks to build responses to issues of maritime security, oceans governance, and sustainable development under the wide umbrella of blue economy. Issues of renewable energy and disaster resilient infrastructure are two of the key areas of concern for littorals and island states of the Indo-Pacific. The technical expertise and know-how to build resilient infrastructure based on sustainable resources and frameworks contribute toward safe and healthy oceans and maritime security. Although broad in its definition, issues of blue economy and oceans governance provide an excellent point for collaborations and cooperation through research, technical assistance, innovation, and capital provision.

International rules and norms

India and Europe also find common ground in supporting a rules-based international order and the role of regional and international fora. The EU strategy on India launched in 2018 recognises the growing importance of India in Europe's geopolitical priorities. The strategy underlines Europe's approach to maintaining a new multipolar, rules-based international order in the context of new geopolitical challenges, particularly the rise of China. Both India and Europe consistently underline the need for transparency and respect for established rules and norms in the Indo-Pacific. This includes upholding the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas for dispute resolution, including on issues related to the South China Sea. India and the EU released statements in support of the UN arbitration award in the 2016 Philippines vs. China case, underlining the UN's legitimacy and importance in dispute resolution. Both India and Europe also support and seek deeper collaborations with regional forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Indian Ocean Rim Association. This includes engagement on issues including maritime safety and security, blue economy, sustainable development, and illegal fishing.

Conclusion

There will inevitably be areas of both convergence and divergence in India and Europe’s Indo-Pacific approach. However, maritime security has emerged as a key pillar of India’s foreign policy engagement and a consensus area of focus. While France and India already share a strong strategic relationship in this area, India is eager to develop its partnerships with the EU and other individual European nations. As this process evolves, India should seek to leverage established platforms – for example, the Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure – to identify and implement concrete deliverables, working alongside its European partners.
Increased European interest in the Indo-Pacific is broadly welcomed in Southeast Asia, even though visions for the region might not be completely aligned. Southeast Asia considers the presence of European powers potentially helpful in maintaining the balance of power, taking the edge off US-China rivalry, and expanding the region’s strategic options. Successful European engagement, however, will require working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This in turn necessitates sensitivity to ASEAN’s interests and goals and identifying areas of mutual interest for cooperation.

**ASEAN interests and concerns in the Indo-Pacific**

ASEAN’s main interests in the Indo-Pacific are two-fold. First, promoting ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture in Southeast Asia and its surrounding regions and, second, ensuring the region remains peaceful, stable, and prosperous. For these reasons, ASEAN has approached the US Indo-Pacific strategy warily. Southeast Asian diplomats questioned what the concept meant for ASEAN centrality and worried that a fickle US administration might do an about-turn, leaving ASEAN and its member states exposed to China’s ire. Concerns about China’s response persisted even as the US forged ahead with its strategy, even renaming the US Pacific Command the US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was only adopted in June 2019 after much deliberation. Although some regard the AOIP as ASEAN throwing its weight behind the US against China, such a reading is misguided. The document clearly states that it is intended to be inclusive. It balances use of ‘Indo-Pacific’ terminology with recognition of the importance of infrastructure development to the region – a nod to China and its Belt and Road Initiative. It also eschews mention of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, which China regards as a containment strategy. Instead, the AOIP focuses on economic and other areas of cooperation, including connectivity. The AOIP also reasserts ASEAN centrality. Even the title of the document suggests a certain distancing from the Indo-Pacific concept. As a senior diplomat from the region pointed out to this author, it is the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, not ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook.

The AOIP sets out ASEAN’s objectives in the Indo-Pacific. These are guiding cooperation; promoting an enabling environment for peace, stability, and prosperity by addressing common challenges, upholding the rules-based regional architecture, and promoting closer economic cooperation; enhancing ASEAN’s community-building process and further strengthening existing ASEAN-led mechanisms; and implementing existing and exploring other ASEAN priority areas of cooperation.

The document also sets out guiding principles for the Indo-Pacific, namely, “strengthening ASEAN Centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law”. It also references the principles of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which establishes a set of guidelines to govern inter-state relations in the region.

The AOIP makes only indirect mention of democracy and human rights through reference to “various ASEAN treaties and agreements”, which would include the ASEAN Charter (2007) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD, 2012). The latter, however, has been criticised for including provisions insisting that “the realisation of human rights must be considered in the regional and national context” (Article 7) and that the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms may be limited to preserve ‘national security’ or ‘public morality’ (Article 8). It has also been criticised for excluding several key basic rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to freedom of association and the right to be free from enforced disappearance. It would be apparent from this that ASEAN’s vision of democracy and human rights is not perfectly aligned with that of Western nations.

The nuanced nature of the AOIP suggests ASEAN countries remain ambivalent about the Indo-Pacific concept. Adoption of the AOIP was largely driven by Indonesia, supported by Thailand as Chair of ASEAN in 2019. The August 2021 ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Joint Communiqué referred to the region as the ‘Asia-Pacific’, although it reaffirmed the objectives and principles of the AOIP. At the national level, most Southeast Asian countries continue to employ ‘Asia-Pacific’ terminology, though some have been inconsistent. The clearest public enunciation of reservations about the Indo-Pacific concept may be found in the former Deputy Defence Minister of Malaysia Liew Chin Tong’s speech at China’s Xiangshan Forum, which he later developed into a commentary. Liew maintained that the notion of the Indo-Pacific is “potentially exclusive” and overshadows the strong economic component of the Asia-Pacific. He criticised the Indo-Pacific as above all else a military and a strategic configuration.
Responses to Europe’s Indo-Pacific turn

There is no official ASEAN position on the involvement of European powers in the Indo-Pacific, and the AOIP is silent on this, but Southeast Asia generally welcomes middle powers, including European powers, in an increasingly contested space. Southeast Asia regards Europe as being able to play a modest but significant role in helping maintain the balance of power, take the edge off US-China rivalry, and expand the region’s options in the face of US-China competition and concerns over long-term US commitment and wherewithal in the region.

A 2021 Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) poll of respondents from academia and think tanks, business, civil society, government and regional or international organisations in the ten ASEAN member states supports Southeast Asia’s welcome of European powers\(^{210}\). It found that the ‘EU’ (read: EU countries\(^{211}\)) and Japan are the ‘clear front-runners’ for broadening ASEAN’s strategic options in its attempts to hedge in the face of US-China rivalry, at 40.8% and 39.3%, respectively. The poll also found that the EU remains the second most trusted power in the region (51.0%) after Japan (67.1%) and before the US (48.3%), India (19.8%) and China (16.5%). Further, the percentage of respondents who had confidence in the EU to ‘do the right thing’ increased significantly from 38.7% in 2020 to 51% in 2021.

While the AOIP envisions ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN remains open to “develop, where appropriate, cooperation with other regional and sub-regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions on specific areas of common interests to complement the relevant initiatives”. In December 2020, 43 years after ASEAN and the EU became Dialogue Partners, and eight years after ASEAN’s proposal to the EU to upgrade their relations, ASEAN and the EU upgraded their status to Strategic Partnership\(^{212}\). This has paved the way for deeper strategic, economic, political, development, and security cooperation.

Southeast Asia has historically not regarded Europe as a serious strategic player in the region, but a combination of European action and deteriorating circumstances have lessened scepticism. Action that has boosted Europe’s credibility has included British, French, and German assertions of maritime rights and freedoms in the South China Sea; statements by France, Germany, and the UK to the United Nations in September 2020 rejecting China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea and affirming the 2016 UN tribunal ruling in the Philippines’ case against China; the rolling out of French, German, Dutch, and British Indo-Pacific ‘strategies’, ‘guidelines’ or ‘frameworks’\(^{213}\), the British deployment of the Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21) led by the UK’s largest and most powerful surface vessel ever, HMS Queen Elizabeth, to the region; and the announcement in July 2021 that the UK will permanently assign two offshore patrol vessels to the Indo-Pacific later in the year\(^{214}\).

European powers are not only upping their individual games in the Indo-Pacific, they are also working closely and effectively with allies and partners. For example, CSG21 includes a Dutch frigate, a US destroyer, and ten US F-35B strike aircraft\(^{215}\). Statements by France, Germany, and the UK to the UN rejecting China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea were agreed in advance and all three countries made identical statements on the same day. France, Germany, and the Netherlands are also all pushing for an EU position on the Indo-Pacific. In April 2021, the EU issued its Council Conclusions on the Indo-Pacific\(^{216}\). It is expected to follow this with a Joint Communication on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021.

Europe’s increased economic engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader region has also boosted credibility. Southeast Asia has embraced the UK’s post-Brexit moves to embed itself more deeply in the trade architecture of the region, including through free trade deals with Singapore and Vietnam, and potentially with Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Southeast Asia has also supported the UK’s broader objective of joining the multilateral Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). ASEAN welcomed France as a Development Partner in September 2020\(^{217}\).

Attitudes in the region have been influenced as much by a growing sense of urgency provoked by deteriorating security conditions as they have by enhanced European engagement. While Southeast Asian policy elites often say they do not want to choose between the US and China amid intensifying great-power competition, this formulation obscures parallel fears over unlawful and coercive Chinese actions, not least in the South China Sea, where China has built on and militarised features, and encroached upon the exclusive economic zones of littoral states. The framing of not wanting to choose also sidesteps Southeast Asian concerns over long-term US goals in the region and whether these will put the great powers on a collision course.
Avenues for cooperation

The AIOIP highlights areas in which ASEAN seeks cooperation: the maritime arena, supporting ASEAN’s Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity [MPAC] 2025, meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and the economy. Since the AIOIP was issued, the coronavirus pandemic has also given rise to demand for increased investments in health infrastructures.

The ISEAS poll provides insight into areas of perceived European comparative advantage. Respondents were most confident in the EU’s ability to provide leadership in maintaining the rules-based order and upholding international law (32.4%), followed by the US at 28.6% and ASEAN at 16.9%. Respondents also placed the EU (22.2%) on par with the US (22.5%) in their respective ability to provide leadership on trade. The poll found the top reasons for trusting the EU are its stance on the ‘environment, human rights, and climate change’ (43.5%), and the EU’s position as a ‘responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law’ (36.1%). The citing of human rights as a reason for trust in the EU is surprising in a region of illiberal democracies and authoritarian states. This, however, may be explained by the grouping of the issue with the environment and climate change, and the fact respondents partly stemmed from civil society.

Many, if not all, of the areas highlighted above dovetail with initiatives in the French, German, Dutch, and British Indo-Pacific policy documents. The EU is also an important economic player and could better leverage this for geopolitical ends. Reaching an ASEAN-EU free-trade agreement (FTA) should be a priority, though the EU’s difficulties in striking FTAs with countries apart from Singapore and Vietnam suggest the road forward will not be easy. The EU’s concerns over human rights in the Philippines, and Indonesian and Malaysian concerns over palm oil exports to the EU have posed stumbling blocks.

The differing interests and relative strengths of each European country influences their individual approaches to the region. France has overseas territories and 1.65 million citizens in the Indo-Pacific and 93% of its exclusive economic zone is in the Indian and Pacific oceans. France has consequently adopted a forward-leaning security role and plans to integrate itself more deeply into regional security architecture. It applied as early as 2013 for Working Group observer status to two of the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups. ASEAN awarded the UK the status of Dialogue Partner in early August 2021, which affords high-level access to ASEAN summits and paves the way for deeper cooperation across a range of issues from economics to security.

Germany is also willing to advance its regional security engagement but is likely play a more limited role than France or the UK. Its frigate Bayern set sail for the Indo-Pacific in August 2021, two years after it was first reported that Germany was contemplating sending a warship to the region. ASEAN will welcome many of the initiatives Germany outlines in its Indo-Pacific guidelines. These include strengthening multilateralism, tackling climate change, protecting the environment, promoting the rule of law, strengthening free trade, the digital transformation of regions and markets, and expanding cooperation in the fields of education and science. Its focus on strengthening ‘the human rights situation in the Indo-Pacific, however, needs to be approached sensitively.

A Dutch security presence will be complementary to the French, British, and German presence. The Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines declare the country will work together with like-minded countries in the EU, NATO, and the region to promote safe passage and maritime security. This includes aiding capacity building on the international law of the sea and “exploring opportunities in that regard in the realm of defence and security”. The Netherlands, through the EU or as part of a smaller coalition, intends to “speak out more actively about international law, including with respect to UNCLOS and the South China Sea”. It, however, missed an opportunity to join France, Germany, and the UK in issuing statements to the UN rejecting China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea and affirming the 2016 UN tribunal ruling in the Philippines’ case against China. The Netherlands has made a useful pledge to organise a seminar with the Permanent Court of Arbitration and Australia in Singapore, aimed at capacity building for experts from ASEAN countries involved in negotiating the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. The Netherlands has also given rise to demand for increased investments in health infrastructures.

European powers might each place different emphasis on security versus economic engagement, but neither is sustainable without the other. A security-heavy approach would deny Europe important tools to shape the region, while serious Indo-Pacific security challenges render an economics-only approach unsustainable.
Building blocks for success

Strong European partnerships will boost ASEAN’s pursuit of its twin goals of ASEAN centrality and regional peace and security. ASEAN has moved to enhance ties with Europe, including through upgrading the ASEAN and EU relationship to Strategic Partnership. ASEAN has also strengthened relations with individual European countries, such as the UK through granting it Dialogue Partner status.

Europe, on its part, can strengthen its position with ASEAN by engaging the region not just bilaterally but multilaterally. An ASEAN-EU FTA would be a tremendous boost. Europe could also act as a moderating force in US-China relations, steering the US away from a counter-productive anti-China bloc. The Indo-Pacific guidelines issued by France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK all appear sensitive to this danger. European governments should correspondingly seek to tone down any framing of the geopolitical competition as one between democracies and authoritarian states. This unnecessarily deepens divisions. In Southeast Asia, moreover, states reject a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to governance and are concerned that such a framing might one day be directed against them. Acting as a moderating influence must, on the other hand, not mean Europe fails to take a strong stance to defend and promote a rules-based order, including international law. Actions that undermine a rules-based order must be actively countered.

As I have argued elsewhere in relation to the UK, European powers who wish to be taken as serious security players in the region should ensure their presence is persistent, principled, and purposeful. A persistent presence involves a sustained commitment both over time and in terms of level of commitment, and continuation despite demands or challenges that may arise. A principled presence is one guided by and framed as upholding international law, including unimpeded passage and the freedom of the seas, the sovereign equality of states, and the condemnation of the threat or use of force. ASEAN and its member states, which might baulk at a coalition that appears to be aimed at containing China, are more likely to support a principled presence. A purposeful presence reflects a clear sense of interests and priorities in the region so that there is little doubt about commitment. ASEAN cannot be expected to facilitate enhanced engagement of fair-weather friends, particularly when this is likely to anger China.

Common ASEAN and European interests in the Indo-Pacific open multiple avenues for cooperation. Such cooperation will not be free from challenges, including from different approaches towards governance and human rights, and, possibly, China. Both sides, however, have demonstrated an interest and willingness to forge closer ties. This is critical: at stake is no less than the peace and prosperity of the world’s fastest growing region.
Chapter 10. Enhancing Trans-Atlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Áine Josephine Tyrrell

Both the United States and Europe recognise the Indo-Pacific as the world’s “economic and strategic centre of gravity.” The region is home to roughly half the world’s population and about half of its gross domestic product and trade. The Indo-Pacific is also prone to natural disasters, territorial disputes, and nuclear proliferation concerns. In June 2021, following US President Joe Biden’s trip to Europe, the US and European Union highlighted particularly intense concerns over China’s increasingly aggressive posture in the region and on the broader international stage. Concerns around China’s rise are also at the forefront of individual European national strategies towards the Indo-Pacific. The desire for a broad and well-coordinated response to China in is the most important factor driving US-European strategic convergence in the region.

This chapter examines the dominant China factor and related motivations driving trans-Atlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It explores avenues for further progress, including through partnerships with other regional governments. It concludes by outlining the gap between rhetorical and concrete commitments that currently threatens US-European convergence in the region, and how it might be closed.

The rise of China and trans-Atlantic convergence in the Indo-Pacific

China’s rise under President Xi Jinping has been accompanied by aggressive market-distorting policies, repression of personal freedoms in regions such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and challenges to international law in areas such as the South China Sea. China also offers small-to-medium-sized countries alternatives to western institutions, political regimes, and funding for realising development needs, most notably through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure campaign.

The US and Europe have long had markedly different responses to these developments. China’s more aggressive posture has prompted the US to pivot its national security apparatus away from responding to terrorism and towards great power competition. Great power competition was made central to the US National Security Strategy in 2017 and National Defense Strategy in 2018. Together, these documents seek to present a US grand strategy for countering China’s assertion of power – economic, military, diplomatic, and technological – in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere.

Europe, by contrast, has aimed to remain equidistant from the US and China as a third-party alternative trade and/or political partner for nations in the Indo-Pacific. Whereas the US has unequivocally framed relations with China as ‘adversarial’ in nature, the EU’s Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific of 2021, is more cautious in its descriptions of relations with China. The EU is potentially inclusive of China in those realms and instances in which it respects international law, standards, and norms.

Individual European national strategies towards the Indo-Pacific vary greatly in terms of their degrees of development, stances towards China, and sizes of permanent military presence committed the region. France has a clearly articulated strategy geared towards pooling political, economic, and military efforts with its EU and regional partners. This addresses challenges posed by China on health, piracy, cybersecurity, climate change, and environmental protection. France has also joined fora including the India Ocean Rim Association and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a Development Partner and held trilateral dialogues with Australia and India.

Though the UK announced a foreign and security ‘tilt’ towards the Indo-Pacific in its latest Integrated Review, it was rather vague about how exactly it will become the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the region. Indeed, its most concrete goals to this effect are to accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and become an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, which it achieved in August 2021.

Like the UK, Germany’s Indo-Pacific strategy is very careful not to antagonise Beijing, as China is its largest trading partner in the region. Instead, the focus is on building strategic partnerships with ASEAN nations and institutions. It has also committed to increasing its naval diplomacy, particularly via collaboration with the Australian navy. Similarly, the Dutch government’s strategy calls for free trade and increased information sharing via fora such as the UN and ASEAN. The Netherlands has also committed some military resources towards security operations in the region.

Despite its desire to remain neutral in the face of US-Chinese competition, the European Union has admitted to growing concerns about China’s emergence as a “systemic rival and competitor”. President Biden’s June 2021 visit to Europe subsequently highlighted a range of areas of trans-Atlantic shared concerns. These included Beijing’s economic coercion of Indo-Pacific countries, use of disinformation campaigns, increased aggression in the East and South China seas, and escalation of threats against Taiwan. Leaders also discussed the need for the US and Europe to drive improved responses to climate change and Covid-19, in partnership and consultation with Indo-Pacific countries.
Shared Indo-Pacific priorities

An obvious US-European Indo-Pacific convergence of interests is in securing critical supply chains and trade diversification. The US and Europe must both respond to China’s aggressive industrial policy and acquisition of domestic interests. US efforts to diversity supply chains across the Indo-Pacific have been hampered by its ongoing absence from the CPTPP. Similarly, because it is not a member of existing regional agreements such as the CPTPP and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the EU is intent on strengthening its position via bilateral agreements, including with Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia, and New Zealand.

This year, the US and EU inaugurated a Trade and Technology Council to counter Chinese acquisition of foreign technologies, economic espionage, coercion, and other predatory practices. Washington and Brussels are particularly interested in common investment screening practices and export controls. EU foreign investment screening mechanisms do not currently match the rigour of the US’s Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, particularly in restrictions on dual-use technologies. The gap between these standards can, however, be bridged with increased information sharing on predatory Chinese economic practices and best practices. The US has already successfully persuaded individual EU member states to block export of critical technologies to China. For example, in 2019, it convinced the Dutch government to block ASML Holding from supplying a crucial machine for advanced chip manufacturing to China.

The US and Europe have additional common cause in upholding the laws, standards, and norms of the international order. Both are keen to deepen partnerships with ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Pacific Islands Forum to foster greater cooperation with partners with shared values and interests. Both the US and EU have also prioritised reforms of multilateral institutions, chiefly the World Trade Organization and World Health Organization.

The US and Europe aim to provide alternatives to Chinese infrastructure development. To this end, the US has created initiatives including the Blue Dot Network, with Australia and Japan, while the EU has formed the Connecting Europe and Asia strategy. More recently, there has been a direct connection of US and major European economies’ interests through the Build Back Better World initiative. Launched at the 2021 G7 Summit, this is a global pledge to provide low- and middle-income countries with private and public sector funding for infrastructure development. To prove successful, it will need incentives that can overcome concerns around higher up-front costs, longer timelines for project delivery, and greater public scrutiny when compared with the likes of the BRI.

Both the US and EU have made maintenance of ‘free and open’ sea lines of communication central to their Indo-Pacific strategies. The European Commission is keen to introduce its information sharing and capacity building platform, CRIMARIO II, to enhance maritime awareness amongst allies and partners in the region. This responds to rising Chinese naval assertion, particularly in the South China Sea and through People’s Liberation Army Navy patrols in the Indian Ocean. The re-routing of resources to the Indo-Pacific via the US National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 and introduction of the US Pacific Deterrence Initiative for improved force posture and readiness in the Indo-Pacific both speak to the growing sense of urgency.

Individual European nations are already deepening their Indo-Pacific maritime postures, via collaboration with the US and/or regional partners. In May 2021, for example, a carrier strike group led by the UK’s Queen Elizabeth and including the Netherlands’ frigate HNLMS Evertsen, was deployed to the region. UK forces also regularly participate in the annual Five Power Defense Arrangement exercises with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore. France is a member of the FRANZ Arrangement with Australia and New Zealand and Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group with the same parties and US. It has participated in several regional military exercises and deployments and strengthened ties to India via the Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. Germany has also recently deployed its frigate, the Bayern, for a six-month mission to the Indo-Pacific, with objectives that include enforcing UN sanctions against North Korea and supporting regional EU operations.
Common partners: opportunities with India, Japan, and Australia

The US and Europe share a common focus on forming partnerships with key Indo-Pacific countries to help address challenges. Of these partners, three stand out: Japan, India, and Australia.

Japan is already a key treaty ally for the US and strategic partner for Europe, particularly in providing alternative funding to China’s BRI. Japan has long played a pivotal role in supporting infrastructural and economic development across the region, largely through the Asian Development Bank. The US has partnered with Japan on joint financing for infrastructure, particularly energy projects and those with security implications, such as undersea cables. Japan has launched the Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific with the US and Australia. It has also signed onto the EU-Asia plan for building sustainable, rules-based connectivity across the region. Japan’s overall ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) vision will allow the US and EU to coordinate investments to ensure the rapid diversification of critical supply chains away from China. Individual European countries such as France have allied with the FOIP to better coordinate climate change responses and regional maritime security issues.

India plays a particularly pivotal role in maintaining the maritime security and supply chains of the increasingly contested Indian Ocean. In April 2021, it joined France and its Quad partners the US, Japan, and Australia in their first ever naval drill in the Bay of Bengal. This exercise suggests the Quad could be expanded to include other democracies, including European nations with significant stakes in the region, such as France and the UK. The EU-India Connectivity Partnership also finances high-quality infrastructure and deepens trade ties between the two regions. Its focus on sustainability and climate change mitigation aligns with the US-India Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership, which includes provisions for financing development and implementation of clean technologies.

Australia is a treaty ally and close regional partner to the US, including through joint membership of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing alliance and bilateral Free Trade Agreement. The EU and Australia have made recent progress towards closer ties, including through the Australia-EU Partnership Framework of 2017. Australia also has close ties to several individual European nations, including the UK. The infrastructure space is an area of strong complementarity between all partners. Australia’s Pacific Step-up strategy aims to help its neighbours achieve critical goals in climate and disaster resilience and sustainable economic growth. There is strong crossover between this and the B3W initiative. Australia’s inclusion in the B3W plan would not only help solidify the B3W’s place as a viable alternative to China’s BRI, but facilitate the creation of common standards and protocols for investment and development across the region.

The dual US and European focus on supply chain resilience in critical industries also invites stronger partnerships with Australia to secure raw materials. The US has already entered the Partnership with Australia on Critical Minerals, which focuses on joint critical mineral potential mapping, quantitative mineral assessments, creating geological controls for mineral distribution, and developing data analytics for predicting supply and demand of critical mineral trade between the two countries. Europe could persuade the US to expand the relationship beyond the bilateral phase. One way of doing so would be through leveraging the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, which was launched in June 2021 and aims to coordinate bilateral and global economic policies.
Overcoming the commitment gap

US-European cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has strong motivations and could be enhanced through partnerships with key regional countries. Yet it also faces obstacles, primarily around securing levels of future material commitments that match its rhetoric.

Europe faces challenges deriving from the lack of consensus of the EU’s 27 member states vis-à-vis China. While some leaders fear damaging trade relations with China, others wish to align themselves with US efforts in the region. European capacity for military power projection in the Indo-Pacific is currently also limited to individual countries. To constitute a credible deterrent against threats such as Chinese military aggression in the South China Sea, the EU should develop its Coordinated Maritime Presence, which combines member state assets, in the region.

Much can also be done to mobilise action from a greater number of individual European countries. By emphasising protection of trading routes and strategic straits, countries such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal could be persuaded to follow the likes of Germany and the Netherlands’ in deploying to the Indo-Pacific. The US should also encourage regular exchanges, exercises, and partnerships between European navies and regional allies such as Australia and Japan. Europe could leverage deployment of resources to the Indo-Pacific to garner increased US support for future entry into groupings such as the Quad Plus and for bolstering international fora such as the WTO and WHO. This would provide shared tools for increasing adherence to the rules-based order.

There are simultaneous tensions surrounding the corresponding US strategy for the Indo-Pacific. While the US has reaffirmed its commitment to the region to key allies such as Japan, Australia, and Korea, it is yet to offer concrete commitments such as a pledge to join the CPTPP. This is despite a firm expectation from such allies that the US will continue to play an active role in regional integration efforts. Washington should recommit both funding and political support to regional and international fora that allow for information sharing, both military and economic, among allies and partners. Whilst the US is eager for European countries to increase their military spending in the Indo-Pacific, this goal will be more likely to succeed if the US is viewed as upholding its own commitments in areas such as technology sharing. The US and Europe both need a seat at the Indo-Pacific table as norms and best practices are established in the next decade in areas as diverse as artificial intelligence and space exploration. Collaboration in initiating these critical dialogues is vital to ensure regional defence of values such as free trade, free movement, and sustainability.
ENDNOTES

1 European Council conclusions are adopted during each European Council meeting. They are used to identify specific issues of concern for the EU and outline actions to take or goals to reach. European Council conclusions can also set a deadline for reaching agreement on a particular item.

2 For the purpose of the EU strategy Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Spain, and Sweden have all decided to consider the Indo-Pacific exclusively as a field of opportunity.


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.


12 Élysée Palace (2017), ‘Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des Ambassadeurs’ [Speech by the President of the Republic at the opening of the conference of ambassadors], 29 August, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/08/29/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs


24 “In this region of the globe, China is building its hegemony step by step. […] We should work with China […] to intensify exchanges and seize all the opportunities, but if we don’t organize ourselves, it will soon be a hegemony that will reduce our freedoms and our opportunities.” (Author’s Translation) Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa, 5 May 2018. https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-2070-fr.pdf


30 Ibid.


Ibid


Ibid


G7 UK (2021) ‘G7 UK Homepage’, https://www.g7uk.org/


Ibid


Publications/Commentary/Integrated-Review-uks-approach-india

Endnotes


Ibid.


Ibid.


Both Germany and the Netherlands oppose a unipolar and bipolar distribution of power in the region; they do not want Chinese and/or American interest to shape the trade, politics, or security of the region. The two nations share an interest in strengthening trade agreements with South Korea, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Australia to diversify their business ties in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For further information, see Lisa Louis (2020), ‘The outlines of a European policy on the Indo-Pacific’, The Interpreter, 26 November, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/outlines-european-policy-indo-pacific/.


President Biden built upon Trump era momentum in this space via his Executive Order on America’s Supply Chains. This protected critical goods (for example, rare earth minerals and components of defence and technology industries) and launched a comprehensive review of America’s critical supply chains. See President Joe Biden (2021), ‘Executive Order on America’s Supply Chain,’ White House Briefing Room, 24 November, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/24/executive-order-on-americas-supply-chains/.


249 For further information, see The White House (2021), Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership,’ 12 June, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/. 


253 Ibid.

254 Ibid.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.


260 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2018), ‘Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU strategy.’


266 Ibid.


ABOUT THE EDITOR

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